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TEKLA

by ROBERT BARR



Caroline Cox Butler

TEKLA

TEKLA

A Romance of Love and War

BY
ROBERT BARR

AUTHOR OF
"The Mutable Many," "A Woman Intervenes," "In the Midst of
Alarms," Etc.



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FREDERICK A. STOKES COMPANY
PUBLISHERS

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BY ROBERT BARR

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TO
THE COUNTESS LAURA

(RECAP)

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TEKLA.

CHAPTER I.

THE EMPEROR ENTERS TREVES.

THE Romans had long since departed, but their handiwork remained—a thin line laid like a whiplash across the broad country—a road. It extended north-westward from Frankfort and passed, as straight as might be, through the almost trackless forest that lay to the south of Moselle; for the great highway-builders had little patience with time-consuming curves; thus the road ranged over hill and down dale without shirking whatever came before it. Nearing the western terminus, it passed along high lands, through a level unbroken forest. A wayfarer, after travelling many monotonous leagues, came suddenly to an opening in the timber, and found himself on the brow of a hill, confronted with a scene amazing in extent, well calculated to arrest his progress and cause him to regard with admiration, the wide spread landscape beneath and beyond. The scene was the more startling that it burst unexpectedly on the view, after miles of trees that seemed innumerable, hemming in, with their unvarying cloak of green, the outlook of the traveller.

At the brow of the hill there had paused two men, excellently mounted, who now, with slackened rein, allowed their evidently exhausted horses to stand, while they gazed upon this prospect. The younger man was slightly in advance of his comrade, and sat easily on his horse, with hand on hip; while the other, an arm extended, was pointing to the city

lying far below. The age of the former might have been anything between twenty-five and thirty-five: he was, in truth, twenty-eight years old at the time he first came within sight of this western city. He wore the dress of a young gallant of that period, with a light rapier by his side, but was otherwise unarmed. His costume indicated no special distinction, and would not have prepared a listener for the manner in which his fellow-traveller addressed him.

"That, your Majesty," he said, "is the ancient town of Treves."

The young Emperor turned his eyes from the city to his companion.

"It may be well to remember, Siegfried," he said, speaking slowly, "that his Majesty is now far from here on his way to the Holy Land, and that he who has, for the first time, looked upon Treves, is plain Rodolph the traveller, abroad to see something of the land the Emperor is supposed to rule, and which his loyal subjects, the Archbishops of Treves and Cologne, intend to rule for him."

Siegfried bowed low and said, "I will remember," checking himself barely in time from repeating again the title of his listener.

"A trifle less deference, I beg of you, Siegfried. An erect head and a tongue not too civil may make my way easier in the fair city of Treves. Where flows the Moselle?"

"Between that cliff and the city. You may see it yonder to the right, below the town, and again along the plain in the distance above it."

"Is that the Archbishop's palace in the wall?"

"No, it is the Black Gate of the Romans. The palace of the Archbishop lies to the south by the Roman Basilica yonder. The cathedral whose spire you see, stands midway between the Porta Nigra and the palace."

"Think you we may be questioned narrowly when we enter?"

"Oh, no. Many come because of the Archbishop's Court, which is said to outshine the Emperor's at Frankfort."

"Ah, that is better, Siegfried. Now is the Emperor indeed well on his way to meet the infidel Saracen when we talk freely of him in his absence. Shall we then pass unchallenged through the gate?"

"Without doubt. There is also much traffic of trade between Frankfort and Treves, and interchange of visitors."

"We met but few on the road, Siegfried."

"True. The traffic is mainly by the river. Merchants frequent the boats going down, but many traverse the road from Frankfort. Had we been journeying eastward we should have met more travellers."

"That sounds like a riddle, Siegfried. There must be a glut of Frankfort horses in Treves, if all their riders return by boat."

"The horses go by boat as well to Coblenz, then are ridden along the Rhine to Frankfort."

"Ah, that is the solution, is it? Well, let us get on to Treves, and try our fortune at cozening the guards if we are questioned."

Downward rode the two, toward the ancient city, the horses refreshed by the halt at the top of the hill. The great cliff by the side of the unseen Moselle seemed to rise higher and higher into the sky as they descended, until it stood like a huge rampart over the walled town. Reaching level ground again, the riders took a westerly direction, bending their course so that they might enter the city by the northern gate. As they approached, it became evident that a throng was gathered on each side of the port, the way in the centre being kept clear by mounted soldiery.

"You are versed in the manners of Treves," said the Emperor, "knowing all of note within its walls—what think you then is going forward at the gate? Is it well for us to attempt entrance now, or are we more likely to pass unnoticed in the press?"

"It is probable that the Archbishop and his train are about to pass outward to his villa or water palace, as some call it. He travels in state, and there are always many onlookers."

"Where is his water palace?"

"On the Moselle, near Zurlauben, a short half-hour's ride from the gate."

"This then gives us excellent opportunity of seeing Arnold von Isenberg, Archbishop of Treves, ourselves unseen in the throng. Shall we wait his coming outside or inside the gate?"

"We were better outside, I think, for then we may enter unquestioned with the press of people when the show is over."

Thus the two horsemen ranged themselves by the side of the road with others also on horseback, merchants, travellers, messengers and the like, while the crowd on foot shifted here and there to find standing room that commanded a view. Mounted men-at-arms rode hither and thither, roughly keeping the way clear and the mob in check, buffeting with their pike-handles those who were either reluctant or slow to move. The clattering of horses' shod hoofs on the stone-paved narrow street within the gate announced the coming of the cortège.

"Off with your hat, fellow," cried one of the men-at-arms, raising his pike. "His Lordship, the Archbishop, comes."

Rodolph's quick hand sought his sword-hilt, but a touch on his arm from his comrade recalled him to a sense of his position. He changed the downward motion of his hand to an upward one, and speedily doffed his cap, seeing now that every one else was uncovered, for the haughty Archbishop allowed no disrespect abroad when he took an airing.

First came a troop of landsknecht, numbering perhaps a score, then, with an interval between, the Archbishop and his train, followed at a slight distance by another score of horsemen.

Arnold von Isenberg sat upright on his black charger, looking much more the soldier than the churchman. On the further side of him rode a middle-aged nobleman, with whom the Archbishop now and then exchanged a word. Count Bertrich never could have been handsome, and the red scar from a sabre cut over his nose had in no way added to his personal attractions, but his fame throughout the land as a fighter of both skill and courage, caused him to be reckoned a favourite with the electoral prelate, who had usually more need of warriors round him than of the numerous court gallants who followed in his train, and were now conversing in low tones with the ladies who accompanied them. But whether the softness of their words was caused by the tender import of them, or whether they feared to intrude their voices on the conversation or the meditations of the Archbishop, the onlooking but unnoticed Emperor could not have guessed, had his curiosity been aroused to inquire. Rumour had it that the Archbishop intended to bestow on Count Bertrich the hand, and incidentally, the broad lands of his ward, who rode at his right hand, and if this were true the girl showed little pleasure over it, to judge by the small heed she gave either to the crowd that lined the road on each side or to those who accompanied her in the august procession. She seemed neither to see nor to hear aught that went on around her, but with eyes looking straight forward, and a slight frown on her fair brow, rode onward in silence, a marked contrast to the prattling train which followed her. Meanwhile, von Isenberg spoke with the Count, who bent his head deferentially to listen, and perhaps while doing so, to glance across the charger's mane at the proud and beautiful girl, who rode on the other side of the Archbishop, heedless of glance or conversation.

When the procession had passed, the young Emperor sat looking after it, bonnet still in hand, with an absorbed expression on his face. And well might he

gaze long at the iron Archbishop, for he had come on a weary journey to see that potentate, and judge for himself what manner of man he might be who was reported to have remarked to his brother Archbishop of Cologne, when he cast the vote which helped to make Rodolph an emperor, that the young man was said to be a romantic fool, who would be the more easily led by their Lordships of Treves and Cologne, than any older and more seasoned noble. Therefore had it been given out that the new Emperor was gone to smite the Saracen, whereas he had merely journeyed from Frankfort to Treves in disguise, to look upon a man who might prove more formidable to his peace than the fiercest Saracen roaming the plains of the East. Siegfried, who, though so much older, was Rodolph's confidential friend, seemed anxious to know the estimate the Emperor had formed of his probable adversary.

"A hard, stern face," said Siegfried. "A cold friend and an implacable enemy, to judge by the glance I got of him. What think you?"

"An adorable face," murmured the young man, absently, still gazing after the rapidly disappearing cortège. "A face to dream over; to die for. Who is she, Siegfried?"

"The Countess Tekla," answered Siegfried, somewhat briefly and grimly, for here their expedition, not without peril, undertaken against his strongly urged advice, was turned from its purpose, at this critical moment, by a passing glimpse of a pretty face. Perhaps, after all, the Archbishop had made the remark attributed to him, and Rodolph seemed determined on the most inopportune occasion, to give colour to it.

"But who is she?" demanded the Emperor, covering again.

"The Countess Tekla is the ward of the Archbishop. Her father died in his service and is said to have been the only man Arnold von Isenberg ever had any affec-

tion for. The sole living relative she has, so far as known to me, is Count Heinrich, surnamed the Black, of Castle Thuron, near Coblantz. Her mother was sister to the Black Count."

"That marauder! No wonder she was not left his ward."

"There was little love lost between her father and her uncle. 'Tis said Heinrich tried to get possession of Tekla and has even had the temerity to threaten an attack upon the Archbishop because of her, but he is hardly likely to do more than bluster, for, however much the Count may lack common honesty, he is not devoid of common sense, and well knows that Arnold could crush him in his castle as a snail is crushed in its shell under an iron heel."

"The Countess Tekla," murmured the Emperor, more to himself than to his companion. "She is the most beautiful vision that ever floated before the eyes of man."

"She is betrothed to Count Bertrich, who rode at the Archbishop's left hand," said Siegfried, coldly.

"What! To that florid image carved with a broadsword? I cannot believe it. 'T would be sacrilege."

"Rodolph, since you allow me to call you so," replied Siegfried, solemnly, "I have also heard that you yourself are hardly free."

"It is false," cried the young man, hotly. "I am pledged to none. Such thought is utterly baseless. The Princess herself would be the first to disclaim it."

"I mentioned no one."

"Perhaps not. 'Tis false nevertheless."

Two pikes, crossed, barred their entrance under the archway of the gate.

"Where from?"

"Frankfort."

"Your purpose in Treves?"

"We are two silk merchants."

"Your papers."

"Siegfried handed down the documents to the

officer who demanded them. He scrutinised them closely, and, apparently satisfied, returned them.

"What news from Frankfort? How fares our new Emperor?" he asked.

"He has betaken himself to the Holy Wars," answered Siegfried.

"By the Coat then, and are there not blows enough for him in Germany without going abroad for them? I heard he was more gallant than soldier."

"It is not true," said Siegfried, with some sternness.

"Soldier and gallant too, my friend," interjected Rodolph, fearing that Siegfried's loyalty might lead him to indulge in censure which might prove impolitic on the part of those seeking entrance, to those who were the guardians of a gate. "Surely the two trades have gone hand in hand before now?"

"Aye, and will again," laughed the officer, twirling his moustache.

Baron Siegfried von Brunfels now led the way through a narrow street, riding confidently, like a man well acquainted with his direction. Avoiding the main thoroughfare which led to the north gate, he turned into what seemed little more than a lane, and now the horsemen were compelled to travel in file, as the way was not broad enough for two horses conveniently to walk abreast. Neither were there houses on each side, as was the case with the street they had just left, but instead, blank walls, such as might surround convents or monasteries, as indeed they did. So high were these enclosing barriers, that Rodolph on his horse could not see over them, and he had the feeling of a man making his way along the deep bottom of a huge ditch, which impression was intensified by the gathering gloom of approaching night. The lane, continually bending toward the right of the riders, came at last to what was quite evidently the city wall, and on this abutted the lesser wall of the monastery grounds on the right, while that on the left ran for some distance parallel to the more lofty ring of

stout masonry which encircled the city, leaving a narrow space between. The ringing sound of the iron-shod hoofs on the stone causeway echoed from the ramparts in the deep stillness. In the distance a large mansion built against the city wall, stood across the way and ended the lane. The windows were shuttered and heavily barred with iron, giving the building a forbidding, prison-like appearance. The lane terminated at a strong arched gate, with heavy double doors of oak, iron-bolted, in one leaf of which was a shuttered grating that, being lifted, enabled those within to see all who approached. The bastion to the left ended against the side of this sinister house.

"By the gods, Baron," cried the Emperor, "it is well I have confidence in you, for never was man guided along a more death-trap road to such a sepulchre-looking ending. What fortress have we here, Siegfried? This is no inn, surely."

The Baron half turned in his saddle, and spoke in a voice so low that its tone alone was a hint against unnecessary conversation.

"It is my house," he said. "You will be better served and less spied upon than at an inn."

A moment later the Baron, stopping at the archway, but without dismounting, reached out his hand and pulled an iron rod which had a loop lower down for the convenience of one on foot. The faint clanging of a bell, jangling far within, could be heard. After the echoes died away there was a perceptible interval, then the shutter behind the grating was noiselessly lifted with some caution, and a pair of eyes appeared and disappeared at the iron network. Instantly the gates were flung open and were as speedily closed when the horsemen had ridden into a courtyard.

Having parted with their tired steeds, host and guest, hardly less weary with their ride, mounted one broad stairway and two narrower ones, then walked along a passage that led them to a door, on opening which, Siegfried conducted the Emperor into a large

square apartment lighted by two windows heavily barred outside. The inside shutters were open, and Rodolph looked over an extensive landscape bounded by red cliffs and green hills, at the foot of which flowed the rapid Moselle. Although the sun had gone down and the view was growing indistinct in the twilight, Rodolph went to one of the windows and gazed admiringly upon the prospect. The moon, nearly at the full, had risen, and was already flooding the scene with her silvery light.

"You have a pleasant outlook here, Siegfried," said the Emperor.

"Yes, and a safe one."

"A safe one?" echoed Rodolph, inquiringly.

"You see this house is a story higher than the city wall. A rope flung from that window gives a hurried man safe conduct to the open country without the necessity of passing through a gate."

"True," said the Emperor, with a smile; "but your hurried man would lose some valuable time in filing through these stout bars. He would be a ghost indeed to pass between them."

"Not if he knew their secret."

Saying this, Siegfried laid hold of an iron stanchion, one of two that stood perpendicular on either side of the window-aperture from top to ledge, pressed against the thick stone wall. The stanchion left the stone under Siegfried's efforts, and proved to be shaped like an elongated letter E, with three bolts of equal length that fitted into three holes drilled in the side of the window-opening, one at top and bottom, and the third in the middle. The Baron pushed outward the heavy iron grating, which swung on hinges, pulling from the wall three bars with round loops at the end of each, into which the three bolts had interlocked when the grating was closed, and the E-like stanchion placed in position.

"A most ingenious arrangement," cried the Emperor, "lacking only the rope."

"A rope lies there," said Siegfried, kicking the coil with his foot, where it rested on the floor and had escaped notice in the gathering darkness. "It is fastened to a ring in the wall."

"What a device for a lover!" exclaimed Rodolph.

"It is intended for a man's safety rather than his danger," said Siegfried, with the slightest possible touch of austerity in his voice.

The Emperor laughed.

"Nevertheless," he said, "had I my lady-love in this house, I would prefer that she knew not the secret of this window. But why all these precautions, Baron? They have not been put here because I am your visitor, for I think the grate moved rustily upon its hinges."

"No, the window has been as you see it these many years. I do not know its history. I suspect that my father found it convenient sometimes to slip out of Treves without much ado, for I know he felt safer on occasion in our strong Rhine castle than in this sometimes turbulent city. I have not interfered with the device, although I have seldom had need of it. I even keep up an old custom of our house, disliking change as all my forefathers have done, although I have never profited by it."

"What old custom?"

"The stationing of a sentinel night and day in a small room above where we stand. When he sees a light in yonder house by the river, or hears by night or day the cry of a waterfowl that frequents the upper Rhine, but which is unknown on the Moselle, he instantly comes down to this room, throws open the casement and flings out the rope. Although as I said, I have never had actual need of this method of exit or entrance, I have, nevertheless, tested the vigilance of my servants, and have climbed in hand over hand."

"Another question, Baron, and forgive my curiosity. How is it that you, a noble and a householder

in Treves, enter the gates as a silk merchant unchallenged? Surely the Archbishop keeps slack guard."

"Although I know many of those about the Archbishop's Court, I am myself practically unknown. I attend once a year, perhaps, a formal function in Treves, but it is generally supposed I am in my castle on the Rhine, or at Frankfort, which is indeed the case. My house attracts no attention, for it has belonged to my family for centuries. And now, your Majesty, the room adjoining this, and connected with it, I design for your sleeping apartment, and I trust you will rest well there."

"One more question, Siegfried, in punishment for the title you have bestowed upon me; that house by the river—is it also yours?"

"Yes. A small place, but in some respects the complement of this. I keep there a fast horse, and a swift skiff, so that the man in a hurry, of whom I spoke, may betake himself either to the road or the river as best falls in with his humour or necessity."

"By the gods, Baron, and should we find it necessary to enter into a conspiracy against the great Arnold von Isenberg, we are reasonably well provided for any emergency."

"It is said there is nothing entirely useless in this world, Rodolph," answered the other, drily.

The Baron drew in the grating, replaced the three-bolted stanchion, and finally closed the inside shutters. A servant announced dinner, and Rodolph betook himself to his room to prepare for it.

CHAPTER II.

THE ARCHER INTRODUCES HIMSELF.

THE Emperor, having removed the stains of travel, followed his host downstairs to the banquet that had been prepared for him, and both fell to with an appetite sharpened by a long journey. The white wines of the Moselle, supplemented by the vintage of the Saar, speedily drove away all remembrance of the day's fatigue.

After the meal, the Baron, with a re-filled flagon at his elbow, stretched out his legs and enjoyed to the full the consciousness that he had been well fed and was comfortably housed, with nothing more arduous in prospect than an honestly earned night's repose. The young Emperor looked across at this picture of contentment with a twinkle in his eye.

"Siegfried," he said, "I have a fancy for a moonlight stroll."

The Baron drew in his feet and sat bolt upright, an expression of dismay coming into his face. The sigh that followed, truly indicated what he perhaps hesitated to express, that he wished people knew when they were well off. The Emperor laughed heartily and added, "You may not have noticed that the moon was nearly full."

"If I had," said the Baron, "I should merely have thanked heaven for it, resolved to stay indoors and follow her most excellent example. The wine flagon has more attraction for me than the fullest of moons, and I have some rare Rhenish in my cellars regarding which I was about to invite your criticism—a more potent vintage than this of the Saar."

"The Rhenish will be still older when we return, Siegfried."

"Indeed, and that is true, Rodolph. It may have aged so much that our heirs shall have the enjoyment of drinking it. The man who leaves a secure door in Treves to stroll by moonlight has no surety of ever reaching it again. A slit throat is an ill conduit for sound Rhenish."

"Is Treves, then, so turbulent? I thought the Archbishop kept strict rule."

"Much goes on in Treves that the Archbishop knows nothing of, as our own presence here is witness. The town is full of soldiers and bravos. There are many outbreaks in the streets, and a brawl might be fatal to your plans. We should assuredly be stopped and questioned, and we might have to trust to our swords."

"You think then, a jaunt in the country would be safer than a moonlight stroll in the city?"

"I do indeed."

"That tallies exactly with my purpose. Never say again that I disregard your advice, for it is not your secure door I would leave, but your insecure window, trusting to find the rope dangling there when we return. I am anxious to test your ingenious device of exit and entrance. We shall walk to the river, and you will make me free of your boat and your fleet horse. It is well that your servants at that small house on the Moselle should know me, for if I enact the part of your man in a hurry, it would avail me little to scramble down the city wall, while you bravely kept the outer door with your sword against the minions of Arnold, if your own minions by the river refused further means of escape."

"That is true, but we are safe here for the night and may we not without prejudice put off further action until to-morrow?"

"There speaks the comforting flagon, Baron. You are too well versed in siege and surprise not to know

that every precaution should be taken, and that no moment is too soon for doing what reconnoitering there is to be accomplished. I would not ask you to accompany me, were it not that I need your introduction in the house by the river."

This brought Siegfried instantly to his feet.

"Where you go, I go, introduction or none. Let us then to the window before the night grows older."

They mounted the stairs again, and unbolted the swinging window-grate. The Baron going first, slid swiftly down the rope, and a moment after he reached the ground, the Emperor followed. Directly under the wall, they were in the shadow, but the broad plain before them, and the cliffs beyond, lay distinct in the moonlight. The small riverside hamlet, towards which they bent their steps, showed here and there a few twinkling lights, to guide them. The plain was uncultivated, covered with thick rank grass, which seemed to betoken a marshy nature of the soil, but the ground was nevertheless firm underfoot. The Baron, as best knowing the way, took the lead, wading knee-deep in the thick grass, and was silent, thinking rather of the luxury of bench and wine-laden table than of the expedition in hand.

The night was very quiet, the stillness being broken, now and then, by the far-away cry of some sentinel on the wall proclaiming that all was well, and that peace reigned over Treves, invoking piously a blessing on the sleeping city—which Christian benediction was a duty resting on all who kept watch and guard for that Prince of the Church, the Archbishop.

The pair walked in silence as had been arranged, and the first to violate the compact was the Baron, who stumbling over something, pitched head-foremost, uttering a good round Rhenish oath as he did so. The laugh on the Emperor's lips was checked by the sudden springing up, as if from out the earth, of a man apparently fully armed, who instantly put himself in a posture of defence. Simultaneously the swords

of Rodolph and Siegfried flashed from their scabbards, and the Baron, finding the stranger had leaped up between him and his friend, rapidly executed a semi-circular retreat, and stood at the side of the Emperor, while the unexpected third, moving as on a pivot, faced Siegfried, with a stout sword in his hand, making, however, no motion of attack.

"If you propose to fight me together," said the stranger, quietly, "permit me to stoop unscathed for my pike, but if you are content to fall upon me one at a time, I shall be happy to meet you as I am, although you have the advantage of the longer blade."

"What need to fight at all?" asked the Emperor. "We are no enemies of thine."

"If, as I take it, you are marauders seeking gain from belated wayfarers, it is but honest to tell you that, in case of victory, which is doubtful, seeing you are but two and Germans at that, there is little to be picked from me but hard knocks, or, given a proper distance, a well-placed shaft which you would find harder to digest than anything you have taken inwardly this some time past. I say this but in the way of fair dealing as between man and man, to prevent after disappointment, and not as prejudicing a fair encounter should your inclination tend in that direction."

"Fellow, we are no marauders, but peaceable merchants from Treves."

"Then the merchandise you deal in must pertain to combat, for you came more deftly by your blades than any yard-stick-handler I have met with in all my wanderings. I know a well-hung weapon when I see it, ready for thrust or parry, yet carried with seeming carelessness, as if nothing were further from your minds than either assault or defence."

"You are a shrewd fellow," said the Emperor. "Why lie you here in ambush?"

"It is no ambush other than one to capture sleep, which I had in thrall when your comrade trod on my

stomach and straightway rescued and put to flight my drowsy prisoner."

"And can a man of your ability provide yourself with no better bed than one in the high grass by the side of the Moselle?"

"There is little to complain of in the bed, my Lord, for I take you to be no merchant, but a person of quality. A bed is but a place in which to sleep, and where slumber comes, the bed has served its purpose. I have before now laid down my head within walls and under roof in circumstances of such uncertainty that a man slept at the risk of a slit throat, while here the bed is wide with no danger of falling out, having good fighting ground, if one is molested, and ample space for flight should opposition over-match me. There is small fault to find with such a resting-place."

"You are easily contented, but surely you should have a cloak to ward off, partly at least, the dews of night."

"A cloak, my Lord, although I admit its comfort, hampers a man suddenly awakened; still I should doubtless succumb to its temptations did I not need it for the protection of a weapon that I love even more than the pampering of my own body."

Saying this, the man stooped and lifted from the ground a cloak which he unfolded drawing from cover an unstrung bow somewhat longer than himself. Resting one end on the ground against his foot, and bending the upper part over his shoulder, he deftly slipped the loop of the cord into its notch, and twanged the string, making it give forth a musical note that vibrated melodiously in the still air.

"There, my Lord, is a one-stringed harp, which sings of sudden death and nothing else. Were it as good at arm's length as it is at stone's throw, I should cumber myself with no other weapon; but it is as delicate and capricious as a woman, and must be taken care of. So in the dampness of the river valley I wrap it in my cloak to keep the moisture from it."

"I should think so tender a weapon would be of little use in the rough and tumble of actual war."

"There speaks the unenlightened German! A slender shaft like this, two hundred years ago, killed a king and lost my country to the Normans. The German swine are as gross in their killing as in their eating. They appreciate not delicacy in death, but must needs mutilate the image of their Creator, slicing him with huge two-handed swords, or battering his head with battle-axe, but a gentle arrow, truly sped, passing daintily through an enemy, dipping its fleecy wing in the red core of his heart, leaving little mark to attest its passage, and furnishing thereby a corpse that is a delight to look upon, gives no pleasure to this uncivilised people."

"You forget, fellow, that you are speaking to Germans, and also that we have had the cross-bow for centuries, as well as instruments not dissimilar to thine," cried the Baron, with natural indignation at the bowman's strictures.

"Hush, Siegfried," whispered the Emperor, "let him babble on. Surely the conceit of the rascal shows he comes from England."

"I am a free man," continued the archer, calmly, "and am used to speak my mind, but I seek not to shirk responsibility for my words. If any, hearing me, take just offence at the tenour of my expressions, I shall not deny him opportunity for satisfaction, under the equitable rule that the victor enter into possession, not thereafter to be disputed, of the belongings of the conquered. On these terms therefore I shall be pleased to uphold against you, sir, the truth of my remarks about the German people, your friend seeing fair combat betwixt us."

"I cannot demean myself by fighting with a fellow of your quality."

"Those are high words to be spoken by an honest merchant, the progeny of a yard-stick, a class over which we men-at-arms hold ourselves the superior. In

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a fair field all men, bearing arms, willing to submit to the arbitration thereof, are considered equal. King William, perhaps with some justice surnamed the Conqueror, questioned not the quality of a yeoman who hotly beset him at the battle of Hastings, but honoured the man by cleaving him to the midriff with his battle-axe, the which is held in high esteem by the yeoman's descendants to this day. But touching the use of the long bow, I grant that you may well make some demur regarding unproven statements, if you have seen no better examples of its merits than is shown by your German archers, who lazily prefer the cumbrous cross-bow with a stake upright in the ground to steady it, necessitating thus a clumsy equipment hardly more portable than a catapult itself, whereas this fibrous length of toughened yew can be held lightly in the outstretched left hand, and given but the skill behind it, will nip you off a dozen men while the cross-bow villain is planting his marvellous engine. But let the arrow sing its own praises. You see yonder sentinel pacing back and forth in the moonlight on the wall near the gate. I will wing you a shaft through him, and he will never know whence comes the summons to a less contentious world."

Saying this, the bowman placed an arrow on the string with much deliberation and was about to raise his weapon when Rodolph and Siegfried, with simultaneous movement, sprang between the unconscious victim and the foreigner.

"Good Heavens! What are you setting out to do?" cried the Emperor. "Would you slay an innocent man, and bring a hornet's nest unnecessarily about our ears?"

"The hornets would not know whither to fly. The man would drop inside the wall most likely, or outside perchance, but no one could tell from which direction the shaft had sped, or whether it was let loose from city or country. I hold no malice against the sentinel, but merely offered this example in proof of what I

spoke. Indeed I myself would be the only one put to inconvenience by the shot, for you carry no bow and it is likely they would see by the shaft when they got it, that it differs from those in use hereabouts, for the Germans have small skill in arrow-making; besides I did myself twice these last two days endeavour to gain entrance to that stupid city, hoping to win appointment to the Archbishop's train, and may have mentioned something to the guardsmen at the gate of my own merit with the bow-string, but they, on both occasions, refused admission unless I were provided with passports, the which, of course, I could not show."

"Why do you travel, or expect admittance to a walled town without papers of identification?"

"You have asked me many questions and answered none, excepting that about your occupation, which I take to be devoid of truth,—nay, no offence is meant, for I hold it each man's privilege to lie to any chance wayfarer as may suit his purpose, and I myself never cling to truth longer than my necessity serves. Are you then adherents of the Archbishop and have you any influence with his Lordship such as might bend him to look with favour on my desire for employment?"

"We are not known to the Archbishop, therefore have no influence with him. I come from Frankfurt and my friend from the Rhine. We are but visitors here, and so in some measure similar to yourself."

"I take that to be well and truly answered. I shall deal with you in equal honesty. My papers would be small recommendation to Arnold von Isenberg, for they truly show that in his last campaign I fought manfully against him. But peace being unfortunately declared, I am now in want of occupation. Know you of any noble in need of an unerring bow and a courageous heart at threepence a day, with victualling, and such lodgment as a man, who cares not where he sleeps, may require?"

"I have no need of such a warrior," replied the Baron, "but a man, expert at ridding the world of his fellow-creatures, would find more to do in the turbulent valley of the Rhine than in the more peaceful vale of the Moselle. Here the nobles are awed by the Archbishop, and when he is not in arms, the country rests, but on the Rhine the Barons are at continual feud and there is no strong hand to restrain them."

"You forget the Emperor," said Rodolph, in a tone of mild reproach.

"He, alas! has gone to fight the Saracens," answered the Baron, with calm mendacity.

"Ah, would he had taken me with him," sighed the archer. "I have heard that Eastern bowmen have much skill in the art, and I would like to have tried conclusions with some of them. In truth, I had thought of going to Frankfort when I heard some rumour of the Emperor's departure. As there is little use in knocking at the door of Treves I will on the morrow set my face down the Moselle toward the Rhine, in hope of falling among a less peaceably inclined people. And now, my Lords, as it seems we can be of little use to each other, I will, if it please you, go once more to my interrupted sleep and allow you to proceed on your interrupted journey."

The archer, as he said this, unstrung his bow, and carefully wrapped it once more in his cloak. With little ceremony he prepared to lie down on the grassy couch from which he had risen.

"If I cannot give you employment," began the Baron, "I can at least offer you a more comfortable sleeping-place than the one in which I have been the means of disturbing you. We are going to my house on the river, and I think my servant can provide you with a heap of straw where you will have a roof over your head. Then you can proceed on your way down the river unmolested in the morning."

"Indeed," answered the bowman, indifferently, "in so far as the roof and the straw are concerned I would

not travel a shaft's flight to secure them. I can sleep refreshingly wherever my head touches pillow, be it earth, stone, or straw, but if your generosity advances itself so far as to include a yard of beef and a stoup of wine I will not say I shall altogether and in spite of proper persuasions, refuse."

"I am unacquainted with the present condition of my servant's larder, but as he looks to his own provender at my expense, I doubt not he will be well provided, and the chance may strike you as worth the risk of a brief walk."

For answer the archer thrust his short hanger into the leathern sheath prepared for it, which hung at his belt, lifted his cloak-enveloped bow, and also a long pike, and thus accoutred signified his readiness to follow them.

They marched in file, the Baron leading and the archer bringing up the rear, reaching without further adventure the margin of the swift flowing Moselle, then proceeded along its bank until they came to the first house in the small hamlet of Zurlauben, where the procession paused, and its leader rapped lightly at the door of the dark dwelling. The only response was the baying of a hound within, and the low neigh of a horse in the adjoining outhouse. A louder knock merely resulted in a deeper bay from the hound.

"He is perhaps asleep," said the Baron. "The rascal keeps early hours."

"More likely he is absent," suggested the Emperor.

The two went partly round the house, which was built with half of it resting on the river bank, while the other half was supported by piles rising from the water. This lower portion was enclosed, and had a door that allowed the skiff to be taken in or out. The Baron, noticing that the water door was ajar, pushed it further open with his sword, and bending over, endeavoured to peer inside, as well as the darkness would allow him.

"The boat is gone," he said; "the fellow evidently

fancies a moonlight row. I shall hold some account with him when he returns."

"I think he owes you an explanation," replied Rodolph. "It would be somewhat inconvenient were the Archbishop's troops after us, and we desired to escape by the water."

The Baron said nothing, but his black looks boded ill for the absent menial.

"Some apology is due to the archer for a postponed supper," continued Rodolph. "Let us quit this muddy spot and discharge that duty, in the hope that his conversation may strengthen our patience while we wait."

They climbed up the bank and came again to the front of the house, where they found the bowman fully accoutred, sitting with his back against the wall, his head inclined on one shoulder, sound asleep. The moonlight shone upon him, and he snored gently.

"His peaceful slumber is certainly a mark of confidence in his host. Blessed is he who can sleep when he wills," said the Emperor, looking down upon him. "If the fellow's skill at all equals his boasting, I might do worse than send him to Frankfort, to instruct a band of archers that would give good account of themselves in time of trouble."

"To whom in Frankfort could you send him, and whom should the bowman name as his sponsor when he arrived there? If he said he was sent by a worthy merchant in Treves, I doubt if he would receive much attention when his journey was completed."

"That is true," returned Rodolph. "I fear I must part company with him when we have fed him. Still I should like to see some sample of his skill before we dismiss him."

"That is easily tested if he does not shrink from the trial. On the other side of the river I see rising and flying further up first one heron, and then another, from which I surmise that my rascal is working his way homeward in the skiff along the further shore, where the current is slackest. He seems to be dis-

turbing the birds and so this some time back I have noted his slow progress. If our archer can wing you one of these long-legged fowls, we may well believe he could have surprised the sentinel.

"Hey, bowman," continued the Baron, stirring up the sleeper with his foot, "I hear my servant coming and we will be in presently. But first we would like to hear the hum of your bow-string, if your skill has not deserted you since you had sinister designs on the sentinel above the gate."

The archer had sprung to his feet, wide-awake, the moment he felt a touch upon his body.

"You can hardly expect me to bring down a man on Treves' wall from here," he said, casting his eye toward the city. "My shaft does not live in the air longer than one may slowly count a score. Nevertheless I am willing to try, although I cannot guarantee a pleasurable result."

"We set no such impossibility before the strength of your weapon; what we desire——"

"Nay, I spoke not of impossibility, but of surety," interrupted the archer. "I can throw you an arrow high in the air and can guarantee that it will fall within Treves or not far short of it, but to say definitely that it will hit such and such a button in a man's doublet at that distance, would be wild prophecy, for you cannot predict the home-coming of a descending shaft, from which, as it were, the life and vigour of it has departed, as you can the unerringness of an arrow sped horizontally, retaining the message given to it by thumb and fingers until it reaches the person to whom admonition is thus forwarded through its agency."

While he spoke the archer had unwound the cloak from the bow and now he strung the weapon with anxious care, after which he plucked a shaft from the quiver that hung at his back.

"There are herons rising ever and anon from yonder bank. The darkness of the cliff somewhat obscures them, and they hang not out against the sky like your

soldier on the wall. Nevertheless the moon shines fairly on them and the distance is less, so I beg of you to show us your skill upon the body of the next that comes between us and the rocks."

"Now the Fiend fry me on his gridiron," cried the archer, glancing at the opposite cliffs, "I would rather shoot you ten soldiers than one bird flapping through the air, for that asks of a Bowman the measuring of the distance the heron will advance from the time the arrow leaves the string until it coincides with its quarry, the which renders necessary also the nice adjustment by the eye of the space between myself and the bird, a difficult enough task in broad day, causing such a venture in the night to mix more blind chance with marksmanship than any one not versed in necromancy should be called upon to endure."

"So this is the outcome of your bragging!" cried the Baron, already angered by the absence of his servant. "You well knew we would allow no shots at a soldier and so you boasted safely. When a fair mark is offered you, then come excuses and the making of conditions. I have a mind, braggart, to lay my sword across your back, or rather a stout cudgel which would better accord with your condition."

The archer stepped rapidly away from them at this threat and said, with arrow still notched on the string:

"If you meditate any such breach of a hospitality which I accepted at your proffer, and not of my own seeking, I would tell you first that I am a free man, formal engagement having been refused by you, so keep your cudgels for your laggard who deserves them, as standing thus by his delay between a hungry man and his meat; while secondly I would inform you that on the attempt at my chastisement, seeing the same is unmerited, I would first put this shaft through you and then its mate into the middle of your comrade, before he could lift foot to help you, and neither of you would complain of any inaccuracy of aim,

swift as the shafts would follow each other. So advance one or both at your peril."

"Tush, tush," cried the Emperor, "no one will molest you. While you chatter the heron escapes. There is one rising even now and will vanish like his companions unscathed."

The archer turned quickly to the north, his bow hanging almost horizontally in his left hand. He seemed in no hurry to shoot, but watched the bird beating the air heavily with its huge wings, its long legs trailing behind, making seemingly slow and laborious motion across the moonlit face of the opposite cliff. Suddenly the archer, having to his satisfaction measured the distance with his eye, straightened himself, lifted his bow to the perpendicular, drew back the string to his right ear, and apparently taking no aim, let fly the shaft into the night. He leaned forward, trying to watch its flight, but none saw the arrow after it left the bow. The heron, however, with a cry of affright, plunged downward, and whirled over and over until it struck the water with a splash.

"Nevertheless," said the archer, in a dissatisfied tone, "'tis no fair test, and is, like enough, pure accident."

"It is a marvellous shot," cried the Emperor, with enthusiasm, "and such art is wondrous cheap at three-pence a day."

"With lodgment and provender," added the archer, once more unstringing his bow.

"Here, if your pouch has no hole in the bottom of it, is three months' pay, which will not come amiss in your journey down the Moselle."

"I thank your Lordship," said the man, taking the money with great readiness, "this is more to my liking than offers of cudgelling."

"And when you hear that the Emperor has returned to Frankfort I would strongly advise you to go thither, for he is a lover of good qualities wherever found. As for the offer of cudgelling, 'twas but a jest, or at most the outcome of the delay of our custodian."

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"Here he is," said the Baron. "I think he will speedily regret his absence."

Across the moonlit river, in a small boat that drifted sideways rapidly in the swift current, a man rowed with sturdy strokes. The two who awaited him stood silently on the bank and watched his approach. The archer had already seated himself with his back to the wall, and was snatching a moment's repose.

As the boatman ceased rowing and allowed his craft to float down to its harbour, the Baron said sternly :

"Get inside as speedily as you may and undo the door. Then I will have a word with you."

A few moments later there was a rattle of chains and bolts, the door was thrown open, and gave the visitors a glimpse of a young man with white face and trembling limbs.

CHAPTER III.

LISTENERS HEAR LITTLE GOOD OF THEMSELVES.

"COME, archer," said the Baron, "arouse yourself. I have work for you to do."

"Not before the meal, I hope," objected the man, rising to his feet.

"Yes; but it will not detain you long, and the supper shall be spread before your sight, to quicken your hand."

They entered a lower room, long and narrow, meagrely furnished, containing a rough table thrust against the wall next the river, with two benches, on one of which the Emperor seated himself. The trap-door by which the man had ascended was still open and the gurgling sound of flowing water came up. The hound crouched in a corner, and eyed the visitors with lips drawn back from his teeth, uttering a low growl, as if he did not like the situation so suddenly presented to him. The man who was the cause of it all, liked it even less, and stood dumb, as one paralysed with fright.

"Close the trap-door," said the Baron, shortly. The man obeyed the order.

"Set a light in the upper window toward Treves."

The servant disappeared up a ladder, set the light, and returned.

"Place on the table supper for one, and a large flagon of wine."

When this was accomplished, the servant, who had throughout spoken no word, moving mechanically to and fro like one walking in a dream, stood once more before his angry master.

“Take your place with your back against that wall.”

The man, breathing hard, but still silent, stood up at the end of the room, his wide eyes fastened in a hypnotism of fear on his master.

“Now, archer, I am ready. Notch a shaft on your string and pin me this deserter though the heart to the wall.”

The archer, whose eyes had been riveted on the viands set on the table, impatiently waiting the word to set to, withdrew them with reluctance and turned them towards the victim who stood dumb and motionless at the other end of the room.

“I am as loath to keep good victuals waiting as any man in the Archbishopric, but, my Lord, I have failed to make plain to you the nature of my calling. I am no executioner, but a soldier. If you give yonder fellow a blade in his hand to protect himself, I will be glad to carve him into as many pieces as may please your Lordship, but to draw bow on an unarmed man at ten paces is a misuse of a noble weapon, and the request to do so, were it not that this good flagon yearns for lips to meet it, I would construe it into an insult to myself, warranting a hostile encounter.”

“You were not so choice when you proposed to slaughter an innocent man on the walls. Here stands a traitor, who has deserted his post and richly earned his death, yet you——”

“The man on the wall, my Lord, was a soldier, at that moment bearing arms and enjoying pay for the risks he ran. When I myself mount guard I make no objection to your German cross-bowmen practising at my body with their bolts, taking whatever chance cares to offer, and holding it commendable that they should thus industriously attempt to perfect their marksmanship, but to send a shaft through a poor devil standing weaponless at arm’s length, as one might say, is no work for an English archer, the which I will maintain, though you order this most tempting food back into the larder again.”

The Baron scowled at the bowman, who returned his whole regard to the table. The Emperor looked at his friend with a half quizzical smile on his lips, while the speechless victim gazed helplessly at his master.

"Siegfried, a word with you," said the Emperor, pointing to the bench beside him. The Baron crossed over and sat down.

"It is not your intention to have this young man executed, is it?"

"Most assuredly; nothing but an order from the Emperor will save his deservedly forfeited life."

"Then God help him," said Rodolph, "for the Emperor is far away. If, however, my own poor word can avail him, I would gladly see him spared, and this without in any way underrating the heinousness of his crime."

"His desertion might have cost either of us our lives, as you yourself admitted but a short while since. I can forgive anything rather than absence from the post of duty."

"I grant you that if he were not alone here his offence would be unpardonable, if but for the effect on others, but there is none other to make a precedent of leniency. Then there is this to be said, he has had a stern lesson, for if ever man read death in the eye of another he saw it in yours a moment ago, although at first I thought you were jesting. If you spare him, he will therefore be the truer in future and will not soon forget this night, while another who takes his place will still have the lesson to learn. May I question him?"

"Certainly. He is yours, as I am."

"Hark ye, fellow, were you ever out with that boat before?"

"Yes, my Lord."

"You see it is not the first offence. I beg you to let me execute justice upon him," said the Baron.

"A worse man would have denied it," responded

Rodolph, eagerly. "He speaks the truth when he knows it prejudices his case. I like the fellow, although he is so badly frightened. Where do you voyage, sirrah?"

"To the Archbishop's palace, my Lord."

"To the Archbishop's palace?" echoed both Rodolph and Siegfried, in a breath. "In the Fiend's name what have you to do with the Archbishop or his Palace?"

The young fellow cleared his throat, and some colour mounted to his pale face.

"My Lord," he stammered, "a maid, who is named Hilda——"

"I could have sworn it," cried the Emperor. "Now we have the woman, the riddle unravels itself. What of Hilda, my young gallant?"

"She is tirewoman of the Countess Tekla——"

"Ha!" ejaculated the Emperor, a sudden interest coming into his face, while the Baron's frown grew blacker. "You met with Hilda then to-night?"

"Not so, my Lord. I was on my way to meet her when, in the still night, I heard a knock, and fearing it might be at this door I hurried back; alas! that I kept your Lordship waiting."

"Then if I understand you aright, Hilda has now accepted our late *rôle*."

The man looked at the ground, evidently not comprehending the last remark.

"Hilda is at this moment waiting for you, then," explained Rodolph.

"Yes, my Lord."

The Emperor turned his frank smiling face upon the Baron, who sat with his chin in his hand, grimly regarding the servant, who, now that there seemed hope of rescue, kept his eyes fixed on the floor.

"You see," said Rodolph, "'tis but a simple lover's meeting, and I have known great affairs of State put aside for such. What wonder that the boy forgot his

duty and stole away in your skiff to have a few sweet words with the doubtless charming Hilda."

"I distrust him," said the Baron, in a low voice. "I like not this traffic with the Archbishop's Palace. Arnold von Isenberg is a suspicious man, and has little scruple regarding the means he uses to satisfy either his curiosity or his resentment. This young fool may be innocent, but I doubt it. He made no protest against my judgment just now, but stood silent, like one who knew his doom was merited. The Archbishop may have heard something from his spies about this shuttered house, and its mysterious horse, never taken out save for exercise. This young fellow is practically a stranger to me. He is not one of my hereditary servants, for I wished to have a man here who knew no one in my house at Treves, and my servants there know nothing of this place at the river, except the man on guard, who unbars the window and throws down the rope when a light is displayed here, and he knows no more than that. As for this fellow here and his glib love story I mistrust him thoroughly."

"I think you do him wrong. If ever I saw an honest face, it is his. Besides, what harm can he do, since he knows nothing?"

"The mystery of the house, and even his lack of knowledge might lead to an investigation. Ordinarily I should care little for that, but now you are here, I wish to move with all caution."

"Then his truth is easily put to the test. I would vouch for the fellow from his looks alone, but, as you say, much depends on his fidelity. He cannot complain that his absence has aroused suspicion, so we will insist that a second absence shall allay it. We will go with him in the boat to meet this waiting girl and hear what comes of their conversation. He will have no chance of warning her, and if there is fair love-talk between them you will then be satisfied."

"We cannot go with him unseen."

"Why not? We shall be in the shadow of the Pal-

ace and in the bottom of the skiff with our cloaks around us. It will not be a dignified position, but anything is better than a slumbering distrust of one's underlings, and then our situation will be heavenly compared with his in any case. If he is a traitor he will assuredly betray himself by trying to warn his confederate; if he is merely a lover it will be somewhat embarrassing to uphold this character when he knows he has an audience. But a man will do much to save his neck, and he will doubtless come passably off with his rehearsal. If it is a woman who waits for him, and if she proves ardent in her affections, we may have some ado to keep from laughter, but even then our position will be enviable compared with his."

The conversation at this point was broken in upon by a doleful voice which came from the patient archer.

"I have met much hospitality of varying kinds, in different parts of the world," he said, mournfully; "but never anything bearing resemblance to this. I have heard that in savage lands they place food before a hungry prisoner, the which he is unable to reach, although the sight of it feasts his eyes and the aroma therefrom tickles his nostrils. But to think that in a Christian land, where——"

"In God's name, good fellow, are you still hungering?" cried the Baron. "I thought when everything was prepared you would not need a formal invitation. Fall to, fall to, without further delay, and prove yourself as good a trencherman as you are excellent in archery."

The bowman, losing no further time in talk, at once began his long postponed repast, and continued the same with such absorption that the Emperor and the Baron went on with their conversation in no fear of interruption from him. Siegfried, with some reluctance, agreed to the plan proposed by Rodolph. The latter beckoned to the man standing by the wall, awaiting knowledge of his fate with that extreme

anxiety which the uncertain tenure whereby he held his life was sure to occasion.

"You know, doubtless," began the Emperor, "that the late desertion of the post entrusted to you has forfeited your life to your justly incensed master?"

The young man made a motion of assent to this proposition.

"Having found you false in one thing, it is but natural that your master should distrust you in all, and therefore he disbelieves the tale you have told of meeting with a maid, attributing other motives to your visit to the Palace."

"What other motive could I have?"

"That remains to be seen. Are you willing, then, that we should put your fidelity to the test?"

"I am willing."

"Remember that you gain your life thereby. Where is it that you meet this maid?"

"On the river balcony of the Palace, at the corner nearest here."

"How high is this balcony from the water?"

"Less than a man's height. Standing in the boat the floor is level with my shoulders."

"Is it your custom to ascend upon the balcony?"

"No, my Lord. I stand there holding the rope in my hand, which coming from the prow of the skiff passes round one of the balustrades. Thus, in case of interruption, I can instantly release my hold, sit down, and float away unseen."

The Emperor glanced at Siegfried with a look that plainly said, "This man speaks the truth." But the Baron, with perplexed brows, showed that he thought all the worse of him. Thus do the same words produce differing effects on different minds.

"Now, hark ye, fellow," said the Emperor, with more severity in his tone than he had yet used, "and give good heed to what I say, for much depends on it, especially to you. We will accompany you in the boat to this tryst upon the water, but will so bestow

ourselves that we shall be unseen by whoever there awaits you. Now, mark this: you are to proceed thither silently; you are to give neither sign nor signal. If you so much as cough, your neck shall suffer for it. If you attempt to whisper, or say aught that is inaudible to us, as we lie in your boat, we will adjudge you a traitor. If it is but innocent love traffic that calls you to the balcony, you will carry on your flirtation as if we were not within hearing distance, and I will hold you unscathed for anything you may say. Are you honest with this girl?"

"As honest as I am with you, my Lord."

"Ah! that is somewhat in doubt at the moment, but if you are honest then will I give your Hilda a handsome dowry when she weds with the boatman of the Moselle. Are you content with the trial?"

"I am content, my Lord."

"Then get ready the boat, so that we may not keep the maiden waiting."

The young man raised the trap-door and disappeared down the steps.

"I hope he will prove himself a true man," said the Baron, evidently somewhat shaken in his suspicions by the straightforward answers and actions of the person accused.

"By the Holy Coat," cried the Emperor, with a laugh, "it is well for us if he does so."

"Well for *us*?" echoed the Baron; "well for him you mean surely."

"Not so. Look you in what plight he has us should he be a traitor. We are wrapped in our cloaks, lying in the bottom of the skiff. The young man steers us to this balcony, springs nimbly upon it, the rope in his hand, deftly with his foot upsetting the boat, as, like my countryman, William Tell, he leaps from it. He cries aloud, 'Treason! treason against my Lord, the Archbishop!' The guards rush out, we are fished dripping from the water, and dragged before Archbishop Arnold to explain to him who we are and what

we did cruising round his Moselle palace. If he is false, being a quick-witted man he sees his doom is fixed should he refuse the test, while by accepting our proposal we at once deliver ourselves shackled into his hands. I should ask nothing better than to have two fools, who were my enemies, placed thus at my disposal."

The Baron sprang to his feet with an oath. "We shall go on no such hare-brained excursion," he cried.

"Pardon," said the Emperor, calmly, "but I shall go, most assuredly. I am not the man to propose a test and then shrink from it. But it would be wiser for you to remain here, ready to stand sponsor for me with the Archbishop, should I be captured. I assure you, good Siegfried, your testimony will have much greater weight if you come to the Palace dry, than if you are a dripping accomplice, rescued by his men-at-arms."

"Where you go, I go," answered the Baron, nonplussed.

The boatman put his head up through the trap-door and announced that the skiff was ready. The Emperor laughed as he flung his cloak over his shoulders; the Baron did likewise, but there was disquietude on his brow.

"There is like to be enough of meat," said the archer, seeing they were about to depart, "but if you are to be long absent I would fain be put into communication with the hogshead from which this most excellent flagon is accustomed to be replenished. Wine, when a man is eating, makes fair escort for good food down the throat, but one is scarcely able thus to judge satisfactorily of its quality, missing the aroma which the more leisurely drinking allows the palate to become acquainted with. I hold that the proper time for doing justice to a good wine is when hunger has been so thoroughly appeased that——"

"The barrel is in the adjoining room," replied Siegfried, as he disappeared down the trap-door.

The boatman, sitting in the stern and using a paddle, propelled the skiff through the water-doorway and out upon the broad bosom of the river. His two passengers reclined near the prow and thus they floated down with the current, passing the numerous small buildings, all dark, which composed the little hamlet of Zurlauben. The huge square bulk of the Archbishop's Palace rose in the moonlight at the further end of the village, showing some lights in the upper rooms. The man in the stern of the boat sat silent as a statue of Death, and almost as motionless. He allowed the boat to drift with the current, making no effort to accelerate its progress by use of the paddle that trailed in the water behind, contenting himself by giving it a slight deflection to right or left and thus direct the impetus of the craft this way or that. The tall pointed windows of the large hall of the Palace, which, filled with stained glass, gave a semi-ecclesiastical appearance to the river front of the edifice, glowed softly with coloured light, like jewelled pictures against the dark wall, showing that the room within was still illuminated. The two passengers now reclined with heads towards the prow, their cloaks entirely concealing their persons, and in the silence and the darkness, with the mute figure upright in the stern, the weird craft looked as if Charon were its master, ferrying two lost souls over the Styx.

As the boat floated noiselessly as a leaf on the surface of the water into the great shadow which the Palace threw upon the river, the stillness was broken by a woman's voice. She hissed out the one word—

“Laggard!”

“I am not to blame,” answered the boatman, rising, taking the rope in his hand and flinging the loop of it upon the balcony, where it caught upon some projection, and swung the skiff gently round till the prow pointed up stream.

“I assure you, Hilda, I am not to blame. My mas-

ter had commands for me which I could not dispose of sooner."

"I wish I could see thy face," answered the girl, "then I would know whether you speak the truth or not. It is like that you have been to Treves to meet some wench more complaisant than I. Oh, I know of old how well you can arrange meetings in the city, and if with me why not with another?"

"It is hard to be accused twice in one night of lying. I was on my way to meet you when my master came, and he would not believe what I said. I know not how to convince you of my truth unless you ask him whether or no he stopped me from coming earlier."

"Bring thy master to me instead, Conrad, and I will vouch thou art truth teller except where women are concerned, and of that I have my doubts. What hast thou in thy boat, Conrad? I saw the bulk of a burden when I peered my eyes out watching for thy slow coming."

"'Tis but dressed calves that I must deliver safe and sound at a house in the village further up the river. I came direct to thee before doing so."

"Who is thy master then, that asks such strange service from his man?"

"He is a butcher who delights in the killing."

The prone Emperor nudged his companion and whispered, "The adage is true, Siegfried; you are like to hear little that will flatter you."

"Conrad, tell me you have not been to Treves."

"I swear to you I have not."

"And that you love none other than me?"

"I love you only, and would stand against wall to be pierced through the heart for thy sake."

"Oh, Conrad!" cried the girl, kneeling and taking his head in her arms. "No such test of thy love shall ever be required of thee, but I dearly yearn to hear thee tell me so. Wilt thou come earlier to-morrow night; for when the light dims in the great hall windows I must away, and I feared to-night they

would be dark ere I saw the boat. Say thou wilt come earlier, then no time will be lost in chiding thee."

"Hilda, it must be as my master wills. He is a strict man, and hard. If he knows of my coming I cannot tell what may happen."

"But why serve the butcher? If you quit him I will speak to my Lady, who will surely get you a place in the household of his Lordship."

"Advancement may be more certain with a hard master where there are few servants than with one like the Archbishop, who has hundreds at his command. I will answer you to-morrow. If my master is just and regards truthful service he may look with favour on me."

"But you said you knew little of him."

"I know more of him now that he has returned. Hilda, I pray you cast your memory back and tell me what I proposed to do when next I saw him."

"You mean the telling him about our love and betrothal?"

"Yes."

"Then you have told him? What did he say!"

"I have told him. I shall know to-morrow what he says."

As he spoke the lights in the great windows dimmed and went out.

"Alas! alas!" cried the girl, "our time is spent. Come earlier to-morrow night. And now get thee back to thy butcher."

"In truth, Hilda, he came nearer than you wot of, to the justifying of your term to-night. Farewell."

There was the smacking sound of several kisses hurriedly bestowed, then the young man pulled the prow end of the rope toward him, and sat down again in the stern. The boat floated along under the shadow of the Palace, but the steersman with vigorous but silent strokes of the paddle prevented it from drifting into the moonlight, shooting the craft rapidly across the river until it reached the comparatively

still water near the opposite bank. The two in the prow now sat up but remained silent, making no comment on the events of the evening in the hearing of the person most interested, who applied himself strenuously to the work in hand, and proved not only his strength, but his mastery of the waterman's art. The moonlight falling on the Emperor's face, showed a resolute effort on the part of his Majesty to keep from laughter, while the Baron's countenance exhibited a settled gloom. When well above the village, the boatman, with a few quick, well-placed strokes, sped the skiff across the river, and timed his efforts so accurately that it floated into the open doorway under the house.

Rodolph and Siegfried mounted the steps and found the archer with his head resting on his arms spread out over the table, sound asleep, and audibly enjoying his rest.

"Speaking for myself, I like Hilda," said the Emperor, with a laugh. "How does your more experienced judgment approve of the girl, Siegfried?"

But the Baron did not answer the question. He said instead, with some indignation, "A butcher, indeed! I shall give the fellow his life, because I passed my word, but he is no longer servant of mine. I shall take instead this honest archer, who has passed the time of life when balcony work is attractive."

"My lord Baron, you will do nothing so foolish. The young man is a jewel. He is a proven man, while you know little of this stranger, who is a foreigner, and, by his own account, a mere hireling. If I am ever to make my escape from this place on horse, or in boat, I want this young fellow here to help me. I feel I can depend on him in an emergency."

"In that case he remains."

At this point Conrad himself appeared, and closing down the trap-door, stood waiting orders.

"You have proven yourself a true man," said the Emperor, "and I will make my promise good to pro-

vide your Hilda with a suitable dowry. For the time being your duty lies here, and I beg you to remember that a shut mouth will lead to an open purse. Your master will tell you that you are, for the present, to obey me as you would him, and should I reach here without him, you are to be at my orders. Meanwhile, no word to any of what happened to-night, least of all to Hilda herself, who will not thank you, believe me, for providing witnesses able to give testimony regarding her undoubted affection for you. I shall add to your pay an amount equal to what my friend allows you. Are you satisfied?"

"Yes, my Lord."

"You will give this archer breakfast in the morning," added the Baron, "and then bid him God-speed. Satisfy his hunger and thirst, but not his curiosity. And finally remember well that you are to hold yourself at all times under the special commands of this gentleman, to whom to-night you owe your life, for had I been alone I would undoubtedly have made good my title of your butcher."

Conrad bowed and remained silent.

The Emperor and the Baron departed, and made their way across the plain to Treves, where they found the dangling rope awaiting them, by the aid of which they reached their rooms, unimpeded by further adventure.

CHAPTER IV.

THE EMPEROR DISAPPEARS.

FOR three days the Emperor and Siegfried wandered about Treves and saw much to interest and instruct them. Among other things they noted that the city was more efficiently garrisoned than was Frankfort, the capital. Soldiers swarmed everywhere, insolent and overbearing. One would imagine that no such person as the Emperor existed, for all authority seemed vested in the Archbishop. The talk was of what the Archbishop would do or would not do. Whatever nominal authority the Emperor might possess in Treves, the Archbishop was the holder of actual power, and his wishes were law without appeal.

"I think," said Rodolph, "that when I return from the Holy Land I shall get together an army and pay a visit of State to this Arnold. It would be some gratification for me to know that a few good people in this city were at least aware of my existence."

Once or twice the two were stopped and questioned with an arrogance that was particularly galling to both Emperor and Baron. On these occasions Siegfried's suave diplomacy succeeded in avoiding disaster, but he was in continual fear that the anger of the Emperor himself might be aroused and that something would be said resulting in peril. On the third day the crisis came, and then not through any indiscretion on the part of the Emperor, but rather from the action of Siegfried himself. As they approached the market-square on the evening of the third day, home-

ward bent, a truculent officer, with feet spread wide apart, opposed their passage.

"Hold, my fine fellow," he cried, placing his hand rudely on Rodolph's shoulder. "Are you military or civil?"

"Let me pass," said the Emperor, quietly. "I am a peaceable merchant."

"Then by what right do you wear a sword at your hip?"

"By what right do you question me?"

"I question you in the name of his high and mighty Lordship, the Archbishop of Treves."

"Then I answer that I wear this sword by permission of the Emperor Rodolph, being a citizen of Frankfort."

"The Emperor Rodolph is a Swiss, and no true German."

"You lie!" cried Siegfried, whipping out his blade. "The Emperor is a better German than you or any other Treves cut-throat, and he is overlord of Arnold von Isenberg, whose menial you are. Doff your cap to the name of the Emperor, or I will smite your head to the pavement, cap and all."

"Treason, treason!" shouted the officer, springing back and unsheathing his sword. "Treason to the Archbishop! Treason!"

The cry brought instantly all the military, both officers and men, within hearing distance, to the spot, and caused, at the same time, the few civilians of the neighbourhood to escape as quickly as possible. The civil population well knew that in a military disturbance they were safer in their own houses.

Rodolph had also drawn his sword, ready to stand by the Baron should an onslaught be made, yet he saw in a moment that resistance would be vain, surrounded as they now were by an angry well-armed-mob.

"Arrest those dogs," cried the infuriated officer, "who have dared to question the authority of the

Archbishop in his own town of Treves, and have insulted him by drawing blade on one of his officers."

Several soldiers moved forward to execute this command, when Siegfried, holding his sword aloft in the air, shouted:

"Have a care what you do! I am Baron Siegfried von Brunfels, a resident and a householder in Treves, as noble as the Archbishop himself, which his Lordship would be the first to allow. If there is to be an arrest, let the proper authority take into custody this brawling officer, who disgraces the uniform he wears by attempted mishandling of his superiors. By the gods, his Lordship will be surprised to learn of the manners that prevail in his good city of Treves during his absence, and he barely outside the walls."

Those around the Baron instantly fell back upon the proclamation of his quality. Another officer pressed forward with outstretched hand.

"Welcome to Treves, my Lord," he said. "I thought you were in Frankfort."

"I am but newly arrived," replied Siegfried, taking the proffered hand of his acquaintance, "and come only to meet insult for myself and my guest."

"I knew not his condition," pleaded the originator of the disturbance, in the most abject manner. "I crave your pardon, my Lord, and that of your comrade."

The Baron made no reply, but turned his back upon the suppliant. With his anger rapidly cooling he began to realise the possible consequences of his revelation of identity. He would now be compelled to pay formal court to the Archbishop, and give some plausible reason for his unexpected visit to Treves. If any word reached the suspicious ear of the Archbishop that he had been in the city secretly for several days, his already embarrassing situation would be rendered all the more difficult, and he might speedily find himself an inhabitant of the prison, where it was notorious that entrance was more easy than exit.

He bade good-bye to the officer who had recognised

him, pleaded fatigue from his journey in excuse for his refusal of hospitality that night at the officer's quarters, and departed with his guest, looked after somewhat curiously by all who remained.

He knew that they would now hear his opponent's version of the beginning of the *mêlée* and that all would wonder why a noble of the Baron's rank should be wandering through Treves with a man who announced himself a merchant. The mystery would deepen the more it was discussed, and the Baron felt increased uneasiness regarding his forthcoming interview with Arnold von Isenberg. Yet what troubled him most was the future action of the Emperor himself. He was resolved that Rodolph should forthwith quit Treves and hie him back to Frankfort, leaving his friend to stand the brunt of whatever explanation might be forthcoming. In this lay difficulty. The Emperor was so loyal to his friendships that he might refuse to leave Treves. Siegfried well knew that when Rodolph made up his mind to a certain course of action, neither persuasion nor threats could swerve him from it. Their coming had been but a foolhardy expedition at the best, and a most dangerous one as well. The Emperor himself had given out that he had departed for the Holy Land. None but Siegfried knew that such departure had not taken place. Let but the crafty Arnold get an inkling of the fact that the Emperor was in Treves secretly, and disguised as a merchant, and he would instantly surround the house with troops, convey both Emperor and Baron to the secret prison he possessed, and there hold them until it suited his purpose to let them go. No friend of either Emperor or Baron would have the slightest suspicion of their fate, for each had elaborately perfected the fiction that they had gone to the East, which fiction now seemed like to be their own undoing, more to be feared than the wrath of the Archbishop himself. How the crafty Arnold would chuckle at the trap they had laid for themselves!

"Baron," said the Emperor, as they walked silently homeward, "I am sorry to disturb your most uncompanionable meditations, but I think we are followed."

"Followed!" echoed Siegfried in alarm, casting a look over his shoulder. He saw in the distance behind them an officer and two soldiers, who seemed anxious to escape observation and who slunk under an archway when they saw the Baron turn his head.

"Their suspicion is aroused then," said Siegfried. "What can they expect to discover but that I go to my own house accompanied by my guest."

"I thought, my valiant Baron, you would propose to double on them and lead them a dance through the narrow streets of Treves. There would be at least a little excitement in such a course."

"It would merely confirm them in their evident belief that I have something to conceal. No. Our wisest plan is to go directly to my house and let them report that we have done so. But I am convinced that you must leave Treves, and that as soon as possible. I propose, therefore, that we ride through the gates to-morrow, and, if questioned, say we are about to pay a formal visit to the Archbishop. We will then ride to Zurlauben, where Conrad shall mount my fleet horse and accompany you to Frankfort."

"And you?"

"I shall wait upon the Archbishop, and answer any question he is pleased to ask."

"My good Siegfried, no. I can scarcely desert you after having led you into what you were pleased to term a piece of folly. We go together, or we stay together."

"But I must now wait upon the Archbishop. This night's work makes that imperative. Believe me, were I sure you were well on the road to Frankfort, I would meet his Lordship with an easy conscience."

"Well, we will discuss the project further to-morrow, and, as I am alone to blame, you will not find me obdurate. I shall fall in with any plan you think is to

our advantage, for I see you are anxious regarding my welfare."

The Baron von Brunfels was pleased to think that he had gained so easy and complete a victory.

They had now reached the arched doorway, and were speedily admitted. After dinner the Emperor retired early, as had been his custom ever since he reached Treves, excepting on the first night of their visit. Before von Brunfels followed his guest's example he looked out upon the moonlit narrow street, and was somewhat alarmed to notice two soldiers on watch, although they were at such a distance that they probably hoped to escape observation. On the other side of the house he also saw two armed men. It was evident the dwelling was surrounded, and that all exit was now impossible, save by passing the guards or by slipping out of the barred window over the city wall.

The distance at which the sentinels were posted seemed to indicate that this was not done by the Archbishop's authority, but was a measure adopted by some of his officers, who might if necessary disclaim any intention of restricting the liberty of a noble so highly placed as Baron von Brunfels, yet who were determined that no one should leave or enter the house without their cognisance. The Baron's first thought was to put the question to the test by himself passing through the cordon and seeing whether any dare question him, but remembering that the Emperor was in his charge, he hesitated about further jeopardising his safety. He thought it better to consult the Emperor himself, and if possible persuade him to escape by rope over the wall, make speed to the house by the river, and take horse from there instantly for Frankfort.

With this intent the Baron ascended the stair and tried the door of the large apartment which communicated with the smaller room in which the Emperor slept. The door was bolted fast on the inside. He rapped at first lightly, then more loudly, but there was no

response. Hesitating to break the Emperor's slumber for what he might regard as a trivial cause, von Brunfels returned to a lower floor and again reconnoitered, but now saw nothing of the guards on either side of the house. Perplexed, thinking that he had perhaps jumped too hastily to a conclusion; that after all the house might not be invested by the Archbishop's troops; that his own disquiet was the probable cause of his aroused suspicions; he determined not to awaken Rodolph until there was more pressing reason for doing so, but to remain himself on guard until daylight. He asked a servant to put out all lights except that in the dining-room, where he sat with a re-filled flagon at his elbow, ears alert for any unaccustomed sound. Toward midnight he again thought he saw soldiers move silently in the narrow street, as if guard were being changed, but although the moon shone with midsummer brightness, the depth of the shadows cast by the walls made it impossible for any definite judgment to be formed regarding what was taking place on the street below.

When day began to break grayly, the Baron watched the departing shadows, eager to learn whether or not their lifting would reveal anything of the guard he was convinced had been set on his house, but the clear light of morning showed the streets deserted and silent. Breathing more freely, he threw himself on a bench with his cloak around him and was soon in a deep sleep.

It was late when he awoke. Calling a servant, he asked why he had not been informed when his guest had breakfasted, and learned with renewed alarm that the Emperor had not yet made his appearance. Springing to his feet he strode hastily up the stair to find the door still bolted. With ever-increasing uneasiness he mounted another stair to the small room in which his sentinel sat, whose duty it was to watch for the light in the river house, and to unbar the window below and throw down the rope. This room com-

municated with the Emperor's apartments below by means of a secret circular stair. The guard seemed surprised to see the Baron, and what was said did not serve to reassure his Lordship.

"The light by the river has been burning all night. When morning broke I pulled up the rope and closed the window. Nobody came in."

"Why did you not inform me before daybreak?"

"I thought it was your Lordship who was out. You came in betimes these three nights past."

"Three nights?" cried the Baron. "Has the rope been in use for three nights?"

"Yes, my Lord. But, until last night, entry was made long before cock-crow."

The Baron, stopping to make no further inquiry, went down the circular stair, and after rapping at the bedroom door, opened it. The room was empty, and the bed had not been slept in. Cursing his own thoughtlessness in allowing the night to pass before finding this out, the Baron unbolted the door, went downstairs, and ordered his horse to be saddled. It was evident that for three nights the Emperor had been engaged in nocturnal rambles of some sort, and it was also plain that he had intended to return on the third night as usual, otherwise the light would not have burned till day-dawn in the window. What, then, had prevented his return? Into what trap had he fallen while the Baron was uselessly guarding an empty house? Had the suspected traitor at the river house informed the Palace authorities of the advent of a mysterious visitor, and had they learned who that visitor was? These reflections tortured Baron von Brunfels as he paced the stone-paved court impatiently waiting for his horse. He resolved to ride at once to the house by the river and extort full confession from Conrad at the point of his sword, slaying him with his own hand if there was the slightest suspicion of treachery.

He sprang into the saddle, when the horse was led

out, and roused the echoes of the silent narrow street as he galloped toward the North Gate. He was permitted to pass through without question, and now proceeded more slowly toward the river, not desiring to show unusual haste. The light still burned in the upper window, and a few moments' investigation served to show that the house was untenanted and the boat gone. Thoroughly convinced now that Conrad was a traitor, he realised the futility of expecting to find him, as he would doubtless be well protected from vengeance by the Archbishop. The Baron bitterly regretted that he had not placed one of his own true and tried servants in charge of the river house. In his heart he had no fault to find with the young Emperor for engaging, unknown to his host, in these hazardous midnight expeditions. Rather he blamed himself for his reluctance in accompanying Rodolph on the first stroll that they took to the river, and thought this reluctance the probable cause of the Emperor's subsequent secrecy.

Having at last succeeded in forcing an entrance, Siegfried unbolted the stable door and placed the horse he had ridden beside the one standing there. In the large room he found an iron lamp dimly burning, and the trap-door raised. Everything tended to show that the Emperor fully expected to return, as he had returned before. Von Brunfels sat down on a bench and buried his face in his hands. He had not the slightest idea what to do, hampered as he was on every side. He could not go into the streets of Treves and cry that the Emperor was missing. He could not go to the Archbishop and seek assistance, as he might have done were the lost man any one else on earth than the Emperor Rodolph. He could not return to Frankfort and raise an army to come to the assistance of a man all supposed to be in the Holy Land. He might go to Frankfort and await developments, but Rodolph at that moment probably needed the aid of his good sword, a few hundred yards

from where he sat. Every avenue seemed closed to him. Rodolph, in whatever prison he lay, was not more helpless than his friend outside.

As the Baron sat there, in a state bordering on despair, his ear caught the sound of a bugle, giving out an imperative note from the direction of the Archbishop's Palace. This was answered faintly from the town. The Archbishop was likely going to Treves. Siegfried sprang to his feet, and determined to present himself to Arnold von Isenberg, as he had need to do that day in any case, and by noting every look and expression of his Lordship, endeavour to form some conclusion regarding Rodolph's fate. Once more outside, he found that, during his brief withdrawal, many things had happened. A troop of horse was drawn up in front of the Palace. Mounted men were hurrying to and fro between Treves and Zurlauben. From the North Gate of the city another body of cavalry was issuing. Bugle notes came over the plains from Treves, and it was only too evident to the Baron that something unusual was afoot. As may be imagined, these hasty military preparations did not tend to soothe his apprehensions. His first thought that the Archbishop intended to proceed from Zurlauben to Treves seemed erroneous, because of the magnitude of the movement going forward. Arnold marched in state when he went abroad, but he did not throw the whole military force at his disposal into commotion by doing so. The Baron's practised eye, and his knowledge of life in Treves at once told him that some unexpected event had led to the sudden rally of troops round the summer palace. He walked his horse slowly towards the body of cavalry, and as he approached was saluted by the officer in charge, whom he recognised as the friend who had come to his rescue the evening before.

"You have chosen an inopportune time, my lord Baron, for your visit to the Archbishop, if such is your purpose," said the officer, in a low voice, when the Baron came up with him. "I doubt if you will have audience with his Lordship to-day."

"I came with that design," answered Siegfried, with a scarcely perceptible falter in his voice. "What has happened since I last saw you, for there appears to be some commotion of more than usual significance?"

"Ah, that I do not know," replied the officer. "There is something important in the wind that was not thought of last night. War, I hope. My instructions—there is nothing secret about them—is to take the road to Frankfort with all speed. I merely wait the coming of one who is now with his Lordship receiving final directions. Count Bertrich was in Treves this morning when, it seems, the Archbishop thought he should have been at hand. I spoke with the Count two hours ago, and I'll swear he had no idea that there was anything extraordinary afoot. A company has already gone westward with all haste, and five messengers have been despatched, one after another, to Treves for the Count. So impatient is the Archbishop that no sooner does one mounted man disappear through the North Gate than another is sent off. Here comes the Count now on the gallop at the head of his troop."

As he spoke the party which Siegfried had seen leaving the city came racing up in a cloud of dust. Count Bertrich flung himself from his horse and strode into the Palace, unheeding the salutations he received on all sides. At the same moment a man, booted and spurred, but not in armour, equipped rather for swift riding than for combat, came hurriedly down the steps, sprang on his horse and shouted "Forward."

The officer at once gave the word to his men, and the troop started off at a trot for the Frankfort Road.

Baron von Brunfels sat on his horse, doubtful what next to do. As he hesitated, Count Bertrich came out of the Palace, with pale face and set lips, mounted the horse he had left but a few moments before, gave a curt word of command, and galloped at the head of his company down the river road. Whatever commu-

nication he had had with the Archbishop must have been of the shortest, and the cloud on the Count's brow showed it had been at least unpleasant. The Baron determined to see the Archbishop at all hazards, hoping that some chance word would give him a key to these swift and mysterious movements. He dismounted, left his horse in charge of one of the numerous retainers standing about, went up the steps and entered the large hall, which he found filled with officers and nobles, all speaking low to each other; all, quite palpably, in a state of anxiety and unsatisfied curiosity. The Baron walked through this throng to a smaller ante-chamber into which he was admitted by the officer on guard, on mentioning his rank, and once there he sent his name to the Archbishop. After a time the Archbishop's monkish secretary came out, and bowing low said:

"My Lord, the Archbishop sends greeting to Baron Siegfried von Brunfels, and deeply regrets that it is impossible for his Lordship to receive even the Emperor to-day, were he to honour Treves with his presence."

"Even the Emperor!" repeated Siegfried, slowly, looking with keen apprehension at the secretary-monk, who had delivered so singular a message.

"Those were his Lordship's words," replied the monk, again bowing deferentially, which assurance did little to diminish the Baron's anxiety.

"I trust," said Siegfried, "that nothing untoward has happened to cause his Lordship apprehension."

"I devoutly trust not," answered the monk, with non-committal obsequiousness, and after this remark he gravely took his leave.

Baron von Brunfels again passed through the crowded hall, pausing to converse briefly with one or two acquaintances, but he learned nothing; on the contrary, he found those who knew him, expecting enlightenment themselves because he had just come from the ante-chamber.

The Baron mounted his horse and rode slowly back

to Treves, pondering on the exciting events of the day. These events had convinced him that if Rodolph had been captured in the night, he had evidently escaped in the morning, and that this was the meaning of the hurried scouring of the country. There seemed nothing left but to return to his house in Treves, for he thought that if Rodolph could remain in hiding until nightfall he would probably attempt to re-enter the house by the way he had departed from it, knowing as he must, the anxiety his continued absence would cause his friend. Besides it must undoubtedly occur to him that, while the search lasted, the safest place in which to hide was Treves itself, for the Archbishop would most likely imagine that the fugitive Emperor had made for Frankfort with all the speed he could command.

Reasoning thus, the Baron passed again unchallenged through the gate to his house, which he found just as he had left it. He sent one of his servants to the cottage by the river with strict instructions not to quit the place until he was relieved, and to show two lights in the window if, for any reason, help was needed.

Then the Baron threw himself down on a couch to get some rest, and await the coming of night.

CHAPTER V.

LOVE LEADS THE WAY.

ON the night after his adventure in the boat with the Baron, the Emperor retired early, bolted his door, threw open the window, flung down the rope, and so descended to the plain outside the wall. He made his way across the plateau, pausing for some moments to look at the lighted windows of the Palace, but hesitating to approach near, fearing to be challenged by the sentinels who marched up and down in front of the huge building. Finally he proceeded to the upper part of the village, knocked at the door of his friend's chalet, and was admitted by the young man in charge.

"Well, Conrad," he said, "has our eloquent and skilful archer left you yet?"

"Yes, my Lord. He went away this morning after he had breakfasted."

"Most heartily, I warrant?"

"Yes, my Lord!"

"And whither went he?"

"He said he thought of marching to the Rhine, my master having advised him that he would there find employment."

"I doubt not he will obtain it. They were ever a turbulent crew on the lordly Rhine. We are quit of the archer then. Have you seen Hilda since last night?"

"No, my Lord," said the young man, casting his eyes on the floor.

"Ah, there I stand your friend. I am come to hold guard until you return from the balcony. But hark

ye, Conrad, we are all selfish in this world, and I demand due recompense for my watch and ward. Will you make bargain then to requite good deed with good deed?"

"So far as deed of mine may repay you, my Lord, not only for what you offer, but because of that you have already done on my behalf, you are welcome to any service of mine you are pleased to accept. I hold my life at your hands."

"Then we begin fair, and I see I may make for myself a most favourable compact with you. We are both of an age, and although it may seem heresy to say so under the feudal law, there might be some difficulty, if each were stripped of his trappings, to proclaim which of us was noble and which plebeian. The valiant archer, who was your guest, said quite truly, that under arms the best wielder of his weapon was ever the best man, be he titled or nameless, and I think the same holds true where such archery as that of Cupid comes in question. To be plain with you, Conrad, as lover to lover, there exists a maid in yonder palace with whom I would fain hold balcony discourse—but, alas! she waits not for me, listening to the ripple of the river or for the splash of my paddle. In truth, my friend, she, like many in this district, knows not of my existence, and of the fact that I live and adore her I should dearly love to make her aware."

"You mean the Countess Tekla, my Lord?"

"Conrad, 'tis easy to see that you have learned the craft of the arrow, not from our stupid archer, but under the tutelage of the god of love himself. Your first shaft shot straight home. Has Hilda ever spoken of her?"

"Sometimes, my Lord. The Countess is most unhappy, she says, because she is to wed the mighty warlord Bertrich, whom she loves not."

"Then are we laggards indeed, did we stand idly by and offer no aid to the lady. Now, Conrad, what

I wish you to do is this : discover for me whether the Countess walks in the garden attended only by Hilda, and at what hour. Get such particulars as you can regarding means of access to the spot, and beseech Hilda, as she hopes her own love shall prosper, to be my friend should I seek speech with the Countess."

"My Lord, there is a better way than that. Hilda told me when last the Court was at the river palace, that I was to hold myself in readiness with my boat, so that her ladyship might come secretly and be rowed by me upon the water. Nothing has since been said of this excursion, but I will ask Hilda to-night if it has been abandoned. I will ask her also to urge her ladyship to come, for Hilda has a persuasive tongue, and the Countess Tekla thinks much of her. Then I shall tell them that I must have a comrade to help me to manage the boat because of the strength of the current."

"Now the gods stand our friends, but that is a most happy conceit of yours, Conrad! Cupid should be the god of liars as of lovers. Therefore get thee with haste to thy balcony. I see we will manage this most skilfully together. See that Hilda be ready to say a soothing word should the Countess take alarm at my addressing her. Urge thou the water trip ; dilate on the beauty of the full moon, the quickness with which it waneth, and the softness of the summer night. Plead eloquently, Conrad, and let Hilda think your anxiety rises from your desire to sit near her in the skiff, which will indeed be the truth."

"I shall do my best, my Lord," said Conrad, as he departed.

The Emperor strode up and down, humming to himself a song of the Swiss mountains that told of dangers dared for the sake of a lady. He kept his watch, half-expecting that at any moment his friend Siegfried might knock at the door ; but no one came until he heard again the bump of the boat's prow underneath the house. A few moments later Conrad appeared through the trap-door.

"Well, what news?" cried the impatient guard.

"None, as yet. The Countess has not of late spoken of the boating project, but Hilda will suggest it and let me know the result to-morrow night."

"Then with that we must be content. To-morrow—at the same hour—I shall be here, and will again keep watch for you. Meanwhile take this and present it to Hilda to wear for my sake. I should have given it to you before you went to see her to-night, but became so interested in your plans that I forgot. Set the light in the upper window, and so good night."

He handed to the young man a jewelled necklace, and was gone.

At the same hour on the second night the Emperor was admitted by Conrad.

"Now away to your tryst," cried Rodolph, as soon as the door was barred. "I am impatient to hear the result of your oratory regarding the pleasures of boating in the moonlight."

The young man hesitated, then took from his bosom the necklace that had been given him the night before.

"I fear, my Lord, that this gift is too costly for me to present or Hilda to wear. I beg of you——"

"Tush, tush! Do not stand there chattering about trifles. I promised Hilda a dowry: it is in those jewels if I never give her more. This is an uncertain world, Conrad, and few of us know how long we may remain in it. When you and Hilda are married who knows where I may be? I may become Emperor, or may be a beggar; so in one case I should forget, while in the other there would be little gear in my remembering. Always take the good the gods send, when they send it. 'Tis unsafe to wait a second offer. And now begone, begone. Tell Hilda to conceal the necklace until such time as she can wear it safely or transmute the stones into gold. Away, away!"

Conrad descended to his boat without further ado, and again Rodolph paced up and down the room with

even more impatience than he had shown the previous night. It seemed hours before he heard the lover returning, and when the young man appeared—

“Well, well, well?” cried the waiting Emperor, “when do they come, when do they come?”

“That I cannot yet tell, my Lord.”

“Good heavens! May not a conclusion be more speedily reached on a subject so trivial? What did Hilda say?”

“She asked the Countess whether it was her will or no to go out in the boat, as had been formerly proposed. Her ladyship seemed strangely moved by so simple a question. She wrung her hands, Hilda said, and wept a little, crying that she knew not what to do. Hilda assured her I held myself in readiness, upon which the Countess walked up and down the room in agitation, and asked Hilda to beg me not to fail her, if she called upon me.”

“There is more in this than appears on the surface. Go on, go on.”

“She asked Hilda to inquire particularly where I lived, and where the boat was kept; whether any one else was in the house with me, and the like. Then she said she might go to-morrow night, but would let me know. She said she must see the Archbishop first.”

“The Archbishop!” cried Rodolph. “In God’s name, did she say why? Is she a prisoner?”

“Hilda thinks she wishes to get his permission.”

“A thousand terrors! This is most awkward. It will mean guards, a retinue, and what not. Why did you not urge Hilda to beg her to come without such ceremony?”

“I did, my Lord, right earnestly. Hilda has promised to do so, and let me know the result to-morrow night.”

“Another postponement! I like not the thought of the Archbishop mixing in this matter; but, come what will, we are ready to face it. To-morrow, then,

and may it arrive speedily. I give you good-night, Conrad. I will be here at the same hour to-morrow night, or earlier."

When the Emperor arrived on the third night the events happening in Treves, that evening, increased his fear that something would prevent his meeting with the Countess. He felt that he was entangling his feet in a skein that might at any time tighten and overthrow him. He well knew that these three nights' work would meet the strong disapproval of Siegfried, who had reluctantly enough given his consent to the project when its objects were strictly political—the measuring of the Archbishop's military strength and personal power—but now that Mars had given way to Cupid, Rodolph dreaded the opinion of his friend, should he get inkling of the change of purpose. Siegfried's hope was to see Rodolph not only become a real Emperor, but a great one, reducing his powerful and haughty subjects, the Archbishops, for instance, to their proper relation to the Imperial Throne. The Emperor had been inspired with enthusiasm when he left Frankfort, resolving to fulfil his destiny, but now he could not conceal from himself that all political visions had dissolved for the moment because of one fleeting glance at a handsome woman. He knew he was jeopardising his brilliant future, and perhaps life itself, for the mere chance of speaking to her, and sitting near her. But he was twenty-eight, and he never even thought of turning back.

Conrad had nothing new to tell him when Rodolph entered the house by the river, and the Emperor hurried him away, begging him to make his visit at the balcony as brief as possible. The visit was indeed brief, for the Emperor, impatient as he was, had hardly imagined Conrad at the Palace when the bumping of the boat underneath the house announced his return. Conrad came up through the trap-door.

"Hilda is not there, my Lord," he said.

"Not there? Why did you not wait? My anxiety

has brought me here early, yet I could have sworn I arrived later than on either of the other nights."

"It is later; therefore I wonder what has detained her. I did not wait, my Lord, but thought it best to return and let you know. I can go instantly back."

"Do so, Conrad, do so. She may be waiting for you now."

As Conrad was about to depart there came a distinct knock at the door. The two men looked at each other, Conrad in alarm, Rodolph with an expression of annoyance in his face. Much as he loved his friend, the Baron was the last person on earth whose presence he desired at that moment. Not even the Archbishop would be more unwelcome.

The knock was repeated with some emphasis.

"Is there any place from which you can see who knocks? The moon shines full on the front of the house," whispered Rodolph.

"Yes; through the shutters of that bow-shot window."

"Then move cautiously to reconnoitre. We will decide how to act when we know who is there."

Conrad tip-toed to the window, peered through, and drew back with a suppressed exclamation.

"It is the Countess Tekla herself," he cried.

CHAPTER VI.

AN UNWISHED-FOR MARRIAGE DAY.

THE Countess Tekla having dismissed her waiting-maid, sat long in her boudoir over-looking the Moselle, and thought deeply upon the question that the girl had brought uppermost, by asking if the Countess had abandoned all purpose of making an excursion on the river. Such indeed had once been her intention if the iron Archbishop, her unrelenting guardian, persisted in forcing his will upon her. His last word had been given her the day the Court left Treves, and it was to the effect that she should hold herself in readiness to wed Count Bertrich at the Cathedral when the Court returned. The time for preparation was short, and once inside the walls of that grim city, all chance of escape would be cut off. Could she but reach Castle Thuron, the lofty stronghold of her uncle Count Heinrich the Black, on the Lower Moselle, she felt that, for the sake of kinship, if not for her broad lands, he would refuse to give her up again to the Archbishop and to this abhorred union with a middle-aged ruffian, who, rumour said, had murdered his first wife.

The stern Black Count, her uncle, she had never seen, and what she had heard of him was disquieting enough. His mailed hand was heavy, and it came down with crushing force on all who opposed his will ; but he could not make for her a more detested match than that which the Archbishop insisted upon ; and then he was her mother's brother ; if any trace of softness was concealed in his adamant nature his niece might perhaps touch it, for he had no children of his own.

Yet the Countess felt that in setting up her own will against that of her guardian she was doing an unheard of, unmaidenly act. All women were thus disposed of. How came it that rebellion against just authority arose in her heart? She could not herself account for this strange anomaly, and she feared that evil lurked somewhere in her nature. She had confessed this feeling to her spiritual adviser, and he had mildly, reproachfully censured her for it, placing her under penance that she willingly endured, hoping it would bring about a change; but it had not, and she shuddered every time the battle-scarred face of Count Bertrich leered upon her. The Countess knelt before the image of her patron saint and implored help; help to decide; help to oppose; help to submit; but the placid saint had sent, as yet, no solution of the problem.

When last the Archbishop spoke, he spoke as one giving final decision and he permitted neither reply nor comment. The days by the river were slipping away and none knew how soon the Archbishop might suddenly make up his mind to return to Treves. Then the Cathedral, and the wedding procession! Why had Hilda spoken of the river and the skiff; that wild project which she had prayed for help to put out of her mind? Was this then an indication that her saint had come to a decision and that too in her favour? It certainly seemed so.

She resolved to seek her guardian, throw herself at his feet and implore him by the love he had once held for her father, who had lost his life in the Archbishop's service, to release her from this loathed union. She would give up her lands willingly, if that were required, and would retire to a convent in Treves, or to any other place of refuge that might be appointed.

Arnold von Isenberg sat in a chair that was with difficulty to be distinguished from a throne. The back rose high above his head, and at the top was carved in gilded relief the arms of the Electorate. The tall pointed coloured windows by the river, cast

a subdued radiance of many hues on the smooth surface of the polished oaken floor. The lofty timbered roof of the large room gave the apartment the appearance of a chapel, which effect was heightened by an altar at one end, where several high wax candles burned unceasingly.

Near the Archbishop, by a table, sat the monkish secretary, who wrote at his Lordship's slow dictation, orders pertaining to business both ecclesiastical and military. At the door of the room, which was concealed by a heavy crimson curtain, stood two fully-mailed men-at-arms, with tall pikes upright, whose ends rested on the polished floor. Near them, out of hearing of the Archbishop's low voice, stood, cap in hand, a courier equipped for riding, evidently awaiting the despatches which the monk was writing. Deep silence pervaded the great room and each person within it was motionless, save only the monk, who now was tying the despatches into bundles and sealing them at the small candle which burned on the table beside him.

The heavy drapery over the door parted, and a retainer entered softly, standing with his back to the curtain until a scarcely perceptible motion of the Archbishop's head permitted him to advance. Dropping on one knee before the seated monarch, he said:

"My Lord Archbishop, the Countess Tekla begs to be admitted."

The Archbishop made no reply, and the messenger remained on his knee. The despatches were given to the waiting courier, who departed. Then his Lordship said curtly, "Admit her."

The messenger, rising, went to the door, held back the curtains, and a moment later there glided into the room the Countess Tekla, who stood pale against the crimson background. The Archbishop regarded her with a dark and menacing look, but gave no other greeting. Seeing no motion which invited her to approach, the girl, after standing a moment or

two in hesitation, moved swiftly forward and sank down before the throne.

"My Lord," she murmured; then agitation seemed to choke her utterance.

"If you come here to kneel," said the Archbishop, in low, deep tones, "kneel at the altar yonder and not to me. While you are there, pray that the saints bestow upon you a contrite spirit."

"My Lord," she cried, "I beg of you to take my lands, and graciously permit me to retire to a convent that you may be pleased to appoint for me."

"Your lands are mine, as your person is mine, to dispose of at my will, unquestioned."

"My Lord, when my father gave my guardianship to you——"

"I hold my guardianship, not by your father's will, but through the reading of the feudal law. Your father, in dutifully testifying that his wish ran parallel with the law, set an example which his daughter may profitably follow."

"I wish to follow his example. I wish to render up to you all lands that were his. I wish to devote my poor services to Mother Church."

"Your poor services shall be given where I bestow them. Betake yourself to your apartments, and come not here again until you bring with you a bending will and an unrebelling spirit."

"My lord guardian, I do beseech you to hear me."

"I have heard enough and too much," said the Archbishop sternly. "Write," he added to the secretary: "'To Count Bertrich. Hold yourself in readiness to wed the Countess Tekla in the chapel of our summer palace two days hence—on Friday at mid-day.'"

The Countess rose to her feet, the colour mounting to her cheek and brow.

"My Lord," she cried, a ring of indignation in her voice, "add to that a request that the Count disclose to you the cause of his first wife's death, so that

you may judge whether he is a fit person to entrust with a second."

"You may question him regarding that after marriage. I have ever understood that a man will grant information to his bride which he risks peril of his soul by concealing from his confessor. To your apartments, obstinate woman; there is but brief space to prepare for the festivities."

"My Lord, my Lord, I bid you beware. It is feudal law that you may dispose of my hand as you will; but by feudal law I also have the right to make choice instead of a convent and forfeiture of my lands."

"Despatch that message to Count Bertrich," said the Elector to his secretary.

"My Lord Archbishop, I will appeal to our Holy Father, the Pope, and to the Emperor."

"Do so. We will marry you first, and should we have made a mistake our Holy Father hath ample power to remedy it. And now, madame, your audience is ended."

The Countess retired to her apartments, knelt before the image of her saint and prayed for guidance. She was in some doubt that the harsh old man would insist on the carrying out of his threat, and she had hope that he would send for her to tell her so, but no message came from him. Tekla slept little that night, and going down to early mass she saw the chapel already decorated for the dreaded ceremony, the workmen having evidently spent the night in preparing it.

The floral wreaths, the loops of white flowers breathing sweetness and perfume, typical of love, joy and happiness, seemed in such ghastly contrast to the reality, that their simple presence did more to decide the girl than all the other influences which, on that eventful day, helped to shape her conduct.

She resolved to escape from the thralldom of the Archbishop; seek refuge in the castle of her uncle, and from that haven send an appeal to the Pope and

also to the Emperor. The only question was now that of means. Castle Thuron was on the Moselle; the river was swift; she knew little of the geography of the country, but she was aware that the roads by the stream were bad, and she doubted if they extended all or even the greater part of the way to the Rhine. Could she once get several hours start, on that rapid current, the chances of being overtaken were slight.

While the Countess had full confidence in her maid Hilda, she thought it better not to confide her plans to any one. Hilda would be sure to tell her lover, and that young man might at the very outset refuse to undertake so perilous a voyage.

Then if Hilda were cross-questioned and became frightened, she could not confess what she did not know. In the case of failure Tekla wished to face all the results of her rebellion alone, and leave herself the right to say that none other knew of her purpose. Questioning Hilda, and finding she had learned where Conrad lived, the Countess, with the natural craft of her sex, made preparations calculated to baffle her pursuers, temporarily at least. When darkness set in, she requested Hilda to lay out for her the costume she usually wore. This costume she astonished Hilda by asking her to put on. When the tire-woman had thus arrayed herself the two looked like sisters, and Hilda laughed merrily at the transformation, which caused even the Countess, anxious as she was, to smile.

“Now listen attentively, Hilda, and act with circumspection. I have reason for wishing you to be mistaken for me to-night. You will put on this heavy veil so that none may see your face. Go quietly through the Palace and pass the guards without speaking to any or looking at any. Avoid meeting three persons at all hazards; return at once if you see one or other of them, and hie forth again as soon as danger is past. These three are the Archbishop, Count Bertrich, and the monk who is his Lordship's secretary. The

guards will not stop you nor speak to you, thinking it is I who pass. Once outside, see that you are not followed, then get you to Conrad's house and bid him instantly to take you in his boat to the water-steps of the Palace, where I will await you."

"Conrad spoke of another to help him with the boat; should he be absent shall Conrad search for him, my Lady?"

"No. If he is there, bring him; if he is not, come instantly without. But first you must come with me to the water-door and bolt the door when I am out upon the steps."

"But how shall we return, my Lady?"

"I will tell thee more regarding our return when we are in the boat."

Hilda barred her lady out, which seemed a strange proceeding, then, safely reached without question or following, the door of Baron Siegfried, where she knocked twice.

CHAPTER VII.

THE FLIGHT OF THE COUNTESS.

"It is the Countess Tekla herself," cried Conrad, at the window.

"Then unbar at once and do not keep her waiting," commanded the Emperor, eagerly.

The bolts were instantly drawn back and the door thrown open.

"Oh, Conrad," whispered Hilda, flinging the veil over her shoulder, thus disclosing her face. She paused in the midst of her speech when she saw a stranger standing there.

"It is Hilda," said Conrad, to the Emperor. "Why do you masquerade as the Countess, Hilda?"

"It was her ladyship's wish. You are to take me in the boat with you immediately. The Countess awaits us at the watersteps."

The trap-door was open, and the Emperor descended, saying, hastily, "Come, Conrad."

"He is no boatman," whispered Hilda, holding back in alarm. "Who is——"

"Hush!" breathed Conrad, "trust to me and come."

An instant later the boat was pushed out with its three passengers, moving swiftly and silently down the stream, propelled by the lusty but noiseless strokes of Conrad's paddle. As they approached the watersteps it seemed at first that no one was there, but as Conrad with outstretched arm placed hand on the stone stairway and brought the boat to a stand, the shadowy form of the Countess came away from the closed door and a whisper breathed the name of Hilda. Hilda responded reassuringly, and the Countess came down the steps, Rodolph standing and handing her into the

boat with a deference that the lady was too much agitated to notice. Her small hand, lightly touching his as she stepped into the boat, sent a thrill through him such as he had never experienced before. The Countess sat down with her back toward him, facing Hilda and Conrad.

"Now, good rowers," she said, breathing quickly, "keep within the shadow of the bank until we are sure to have escaped espionage, then I shall have further instructions, and remember that if you work well and silently I shall reward you beyond your hopes."

"May that prove true in my case," said Rodolph to himself.

The huge Palace seemed to float to the west; the moon shone brightly, but there was shadow enough thrown by the low bank to conceal the voyagers not only from chance wayfarers, should there be any, which was unlikely, but also from each other. The summer night was warm, and not a breath of wind rippled the surface of the river. Now and then some waterfowl, disturbed by their approach, plashed two or three times, beating wing against water, until it rose with a cry and soared away into the night.

They had made down the river for nearly an hour when Conrad began murmuring to Hilda, who sat next him.

"The Countess does not know how swift this river is," he said. "We will not get back in a week if we go much further. If it had been up the stream time would matter little, but down——"

"What does he say?" asked the Countess.

"He fears we cannot return betimes if we go further. The current is fleet to row against."

"Conrad," said the Countess, bending towards him, "we go not back, but forward. Seek the speediest part of the river, and guide the boat into it. I am on my way to Castle Thuron near the Rhine."

Both Hilda and Conrad gave utterance to exclamations of astonishment and alarm.

"But the Archbishop?" cried Hilda.

"But my master!" groaned Conrad.

"The Archbishop will follow us in hot haste when he finds us gone, Hilda, which will be some time before noontide to-morrow, therefore must Conrad persuade the swift stream to aid his stout arms."

"The boat is not mine," said Conrad, "and I have left my master without his sanction."

"I will amply reward your master for the losing of his boat, and you for the guiding of it. Both you and your comrade will I take into my employ, and neither shall lose by the transfer."

"Will you stand for me against my master as you did before, my Lord," cried Conrad, in great alarm at the possible consequences of his desertion from a master who brooked no excuse."

"My Lord!" cried the Countess, half-rising and looking round for the first time at the second boatman, on whom the moonlight now fell, showing that he had removed his cap, and was bowing to her.

"I pray you, madame, do not stand, for this boat is but unsteady at best. I beg you not to be alarmed, for I shall be as faithful to your behests as Conrad here, and no man can give himself higher warrant." •

"What lord are you, or are you one?"

"Conrad, in his excitement, gives me title to which I make no claim, exaggerating my importance because of some influence I have exerted on his behalf with his master."

"What is your name and quality, for I see you are no waterman?"

"I am sorely disappointed to hear you say so, madame, for I hoped to make good my reputation as waterman by my work to-night. My name is Rodolph, and none who know me will deny I am a gentleman."

"Are you German?"

"As German as the Emperor and a fellow-countryman of his."

"You are a Swiss adventurer, then?"

"All men have a touch of the adventurer about them: I not more than others, I hope."

"Why are you here disguised as a boatman?"

"I am not disguised, but in my ordinary dress—the costume in which I have appeared these few days past in Treves. The house by the river, of which Conrad is caretaker, belongs to my friend, who is Conrad's master. It happened that I was there when your tire-woman came in real disguise, and when I heard that you awaited the boat on the watersteps of the Palace I felt sure something more serious than an excursion by moonlight was intended, although Conrad suspected nothing. I came, therefore, thinking you might perhaps need the help of a good sword, and that sword I now lay at your feet."

"I need a swift paddle rather than the best of swords. My safety lies in flight, and not in fighting."

"My services as oarsman are also at your disposal, madame. I trust that in your presence there will be no need for swordsmanship; but should such necessity arise a stout blade is not to be despised."

The Countess mused for some moments in silence, evidently disquieted by the intrusion of a stranger, yet well aware that if he proved true and staunch his help might be invaluable. It was impossible for her to question Conrad about him in his presence, for she saw he was a gentleman, as he had asserted, but a fear arose that he might be some adherent of the Archbishop, intent on furthering his own interests by delivering her into the hands of his Lordship's minions. She knew that at various posts along the river, companies of the Archbishop's troops were stationed—at Bruttig, at Cochem, and elsewhere; he could, at the moment of passing any one of these places, give the alarm which would result in her immediate capture. He was armed and Conrad was not, therefore there might be some difficulty in disposing of him even if no help were at hand. Still anything was better than uncertainty, and she resolved to act at once. The river

now ran between high hills, densely wooded from top to water's edge. If he could be put off it were better to disembark him in a wilderness like this, than at some settlement where he had opportunity of raising the hue and cry of pursuit. Yet she did not wish to leave him to starve or be torn in pieces by wild boars roaming an almost unlimited forest. The perplexing part of the problem lay in the fact that if he were a spy and a traitor he might refuse to land, while if he were a true man he would rid them of his company when he saw that it was not wanted.

The Countess leaned forward and spoke to Conrad.

"Do you know this river?"

"I know it as far as Cochem, my lady."

"Where are we now, think you?"

"We are some two leagues above the ancient Roman town of Boveris."

Turning to Rodolph, she said:

"Is the Archbishop your over-lord?"

"No, madame. I am a free man, owing allegiance to none."

"Not to the Emperor?"

"To the Emperor, of course, but to none other."

"Where did you come from, and how long have you been in Treves?"

"I came from Frankfort some three or four days since, and never saw Treves before."

"You came to seek service with the Archbishop perhaps?"

"No, madame. I am a student as well as soldier. I came merely to inform myself regarding the manners and customs of so celebrated and ancient a city as Treves."

"Know you who I am?"

"You are the Countess Tekla, ward of the Archbishop of Treves and niece of Count Heinrich, to whose Castle of Thuron you are now betaking yourself."

"You are well informed. For what object did you gather this knowledge?"

"I sat on horseback outside the North Gate, having just arrived from Frankfort, when the Archbishop and his train passed through on their way to the summer palace. I saw you riding by his side, and discovered who you were."

"Were you similarly inquisitive regarding the other ladies of the Court?"

"I saw no others, madame."

The Countess seemed taken aback by this reply and remained silent for a few moments. At last she said, with deep displeasure in her voice:

"I distrust you, sir. If you are a gentleman, as you say, you are aware that none such thrusts himself uninvited into a lady's presence. I ask you, therefore, to leave us."

"I am truly grieved, madame, to refuse your slightest request, but I will not leave you until I see you safely at the gate of Castle Thuron."

This refusal at once confirmed all the fears the Countess had entertained. With rising anger she cried:

"Not to the gates of Thuron will you deliver me, but to the Archbishop's troops at Bruttig, and then return to Treves for your reward."

Having said this she did what any girl of nineteen might have been expected to do—she buried her face in her hands and wept.

"Madame," said Rodolph, "forgive me. I may have overrated my ability to serve you in the future, but I see there is no doubt I cause you present distress. I will at once do as you desire. Conrad, draw the boat toward the northern shore."

When the craft touched the bank Rodolph sprang on a rock that jutted into the stream. Before leaving the skiff he slipped his cloak from his shoulders and allowed it to remain where he had been seated. On landing he drew his sword from its scabbard and flung it to Conrad, saying, "Use that only when you are compelled to do so, but trust, unless something un-

foreseen occurs, to the paddle. Keep the boat in the swiftest part of the current and stop question for none. And now, away with all speed, getting as far down the river as possible before daybreak."

Conrad looked stupidly from the sword lying at the bottom of the boat, up to its owner standing on the rock, not comprehending at first what had happened or was about to happen. When the situation broke upon him he cried:

"You are surely not going to desert us, my Lord?"

Rodolph gave no answer, but the Countess, drying her tears, made reply to him.

"It is my wish that he leave us, Conrad."

"If that be the case," said Conrad, stoutly, "I return to Treves. I have put my neck in a halter only on the assurance of his Lordship that the rope be not pulled. If my surety is gone, then will the halter tighten. Not an inch further down the Moselle do I go; in truth, we are much too far already, and God knows what time we shall see Treves again, against this current."

"Tell your fellow," said the Countess, imperiously, to Hilda, "that he must complete the task he has begun. He will obey you, even though he refuse orders from me, and I will protect him at the journey's end."

"Indeed, indeed, my Lady," cried Hilda, in despair, torn between love for her lover and loyalty to her mistress, "why cannot we go on as we began? What needs this lord to be sent thus adrift in the forest, weaponless?"

"We want not his weapon; our safety, as he himself says, is in flight. Give back the sword, Conrad. I will protect you."

"Pardon me, my Lady," replied Conrad, with sullen stubbornness, "but how you can protect me when you are flying for your own safety I cannot comprehend. The one who can protect me and who has done so, stands on the bank, and either he comes again into the boat, or I go back to Treves. The fewer words that are spoken the less time there is lost."

The Countess Tekla was quick in her decisions. She turned to the young man standing silent in the moonlight upon the rock. She could not but see what a handsome manly fellow he was, and at the sight of him her fears regarding his loyalty diminished, in spite of herself, although she strove in her own mind to justify her action.

"My Lord, as they persist in calling you, in derision of your disclaimer, you see my crew has mutinied on your account. I beg of you, therefore, to return to your place."

"Countess," answered Rodolph, "more great enterprises have been wrecked through mutiny within the ranks, than because of the enemy without. It is unpleasant to be looked upon as a traitor by one we are proud to serve freely, therefore, as a condition of returning I must ask you to withdraw the imputation you cast upon me."

"I do withdraw it. Have you further terms to make now that you see me helpless?"

"I shall take advantage of your helplessness to impose one more condition. I am to be captain of this expedition, my power being absolute and unquestioned. You, not less than they, are to be under my orders, which must be obeyed promptly and implicitly. Do you agree?"

"Having no choice, I agree."

"Countess, as you will, when your expedition succeeds, make generous amends for the present ungraciousness of your acceptance, I am content to wait for commendation until then. Conrad, give me the sword. Hilda, sit in the bottom of the boat, and Conrad will fling his cloak about your shoulders. Countess, my cloak will form but an inefficient carpet, still 'tis better than naught. Lay your head in Hilda's lap, and your own cloak shall be your coverlet. So. Now to sleep. Conrad, strike out for mid-stream."

Propelled by the sturdy strokes of both, the boat shot out from under cover of the land and re-com-

menced its rapid voyage down the river. Now and then a sleeping village was passed, and once disaster was narrowly averted when Conrad's quick eye recognised the floating logs which upheld the linked loops of chain that stretched across the river below a robber castle.

This obstruction was intended to stop boats of deeper draught than the light skiff, and compel their owners to pay reluctant tribute to the lord of the castle. The skiff passed midway between two of the logs and floated over the submerged chain in safety.

The banks on either hand were high, almost mountainous, and those on the northern side were clothed with vines nearly to the summit.

The moon sank behind the hills and for a time the darkness was intense, rendering navigation a matter of some skill and alertness, not without a spice of danger. Both the Countess and Hilda slept peacefully and neither man spoke. Only an infrequent splash of paddle, or the lonely cry of a disturbed waterfowl, or night-bird, broke the stillness.

At last the short summer night gave token of ending. The lightening surface of the water first heralded the approach of dawn, then the stars began to dim over the eastern hills, and a faint, ever-spreading suggestion of grey crept up the sky beyond.

Rodolph ventured on a sigh of relief and weariness as the light increased and the difficulties of the task lessened, but he soon saw they were merely exchanging danger of one kind for danger of another, as an early man-at-arms on the right bank espying him, loudly commanded them to draw in and explain themselves, which command, being unheeded, he forthwith planted stake in ground, strung his cross-bow and launched a bolt at them in such hurry that it fell uselessly short and was a good bolt lost. By the time the second was ready, the skiff and its occupants were hopelessly out of range.

But the cry of the challenger had awakened the

Countess, who sat up to see the red rim of the sun breaking out above the hills and flooding the valley with golden light.

"Are we nearly there?" she asked.

"I think not," answered Rodolph. "In truth, I know not where we are. Is it still far to Thuron, Conrad?"

"We are not yet half-way. It is, I judge, but seven hours since we left Treves, and if, with this current and our own work, we have sped two leagues an hour we have done well. That gives us fourteen leagues accomplished. From Treves to Thuron is somewhere about thirty-four leagues, so there must be twenty at least before us.

The Countess gave a cry of despair. "Is it then so far? I thought we would reach the castle by day-break. Have we passed the Archbishop's palace at Cochem?"

"No, my lady. Cochem is but six short leagues from Thuron."

"Is it your wish, madame, to stop at Cochem?" asked Rodolph.

"Oh no, no. Anywhere but there. I am well known to all about the palace."

"But none would have the right to detain you."

"Not the right perhaps, but the power. To see me travel thus, without fitting escort, would be sure to arouse suspicion, and the custodian of the palace might well take it upon himself to hold me there until he knew the Archbishop's pleasure."

"We must have food. Conrad, know you of any inn further on?"

"There are no inns along the Moselle except at Bruttig and Cochem; I think there is a house at each place where soldiers drink and boatmen eat and lodge."

"How far is Bruttig from here?"

"About ten leagues, my Lord."

"That is five hours at this going. What soldiers are at Bruttig?"

"The followers of Count Winneburg, those of the Count of Beilstein, and soldiers of the Archbishop."

"If the Archbishop's soldiers are there I beg that you will not stop," said the Countess.

"I am not sure but protection lies in the very fact that they are there. Your flight, in all likelihood, has not yet been discovered in Treves; we have many hours the start of pursuit, and are not likely to be overtaken. Still we shall not stop there, if food can be procured elsewhere."

When the sun was two hours high, they drew in at a village on the northern bank, nestling at the foot of the vineyard-covered hill. Here they rested for an hour and broke their fast in a fashion. Nothing but the coarsest of black bread could be obtained, with some flagons of inferior white wine. The river was now broader and the current less swift, so that progress was more slow than had been the case during the night. In addition, they had frequently to creep close to the bank on one side or the other to escape observation, and this delayed them. Consequently the sun was well past meridian when Bruttig, with the Castle above it came into sight, and all in the boat were ravenously hungry.

"We will halt here and dine," said Rodolph. "I think there is nothing to fear. I have a passport, and I am a merchant from Frankfort, journeying from Treves to Coblenz. You, madame, are my—my sister, and these two are our servants. It is well to remember this if we are questioned separately. You, Conrad, will wait by the boat, and I will have food and wine sent to you. Countess, I shall escort you to the inn and Hilda will wait upon you. Much depends on acting naturally and showing no anxiety."

The Countess made no objection to this arrangement, and Conrad, with a stroke of his paddle, turned his boat towards the sloping beach that ran along the river in front of the little town.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE RAPIER AND THE BROADSWORD.

BRUTTIG consisted of a row of houses facing the river, some few hundred feet back from it. In the centre of the row, near the landing, which was rudely paved with round stones, stood the inn, a sufficiently forbidding-looking square structure, with an arched gateway in front, apparently leading to a courtyard. The gates could be closed at night, and doubtless were, so that, in a way, the inn might be successfully defended from assault should necessity arise, as was often the case in those troublous times.

The bewildering mixed jurisdiction of the place, governed as it was by no less than three over-lords, the Count of Winneburg, the Archbishop of Treves, and the Count of Beilstein, was shown by the different uniforms of the men-at-arms who now, in groups or singly, watched the landing of the party from the skiff.

The three Captains, who represented the three over-lords of Bruttig, were lounging round the doorway of the inn, watching the landing of the mysterious boatload. Such a frail craft coming down the Moselle was an unusual sight, and naturally attracted the attention of the three officers, who were, as a rule, excellent friends, except when a fight was in progress, and some question of jurisdiction came up that had to be argued on the spot with two-handed swords. They referred to each other by the titles of their chiefs, each man, being spoken to by his comrades as the Archbishop, Beilstein, or Winneburg.

"What have we here, Elector?" asked the Captain who commanded the forces of Count Winneburg.

"That is for our comrade Beilstein to answer; this motley crew belongs to him. You had the last boat-load to exact tribute from, and I the one before. I am glad that it falls upon Beilstein to deal with women, for such traffic befits not the Church," replied the Captain of Treves. The Captain of Beilstein, a tall, powerful, swarthy man in full armour, twirled his black moustache, which spread across his cheeks like a pair of ravens' wings, and gazed down at the landing party.

"There is this to be said, they give us little trouble in bringing them ashore, but are, apparently, about to walk confidently into the lion's mouth," remarked Beilstein, "which seems to argue that they are water-fowl, little worth the plucking."

"Rather that they know not whither they are bound," suggested the Elector. "The young spark hands my lady from the boat with something of an air about him that was not caught in trading booths, and the girl stepped daintily out upon the cobbles in a manner that suggests the Court. If she improves on closer inspection, Beilstein, you are in luck. Would there were three women instead of two."

"They are sufficient as it is," said Winneburg, with a chuckle, "for the Church has just disclaimed all desire for such merchandise."

"Ho, within there, Host," cried Beilstein, through the gateway. "Here comes gentle custom for thine inn, and you are not by to welcome it."

In response to his call a short burly sullen-looking man, with bullet head, came out and stood under the arch, looking at the group ascending from the river, but as there was little pleasure in his gaze he probably expected small profit from their approach.

Rodolph cast a rapid glance at the four men, bowed slightly to the three officers, who took no notice of his salutation, and addressing the host, said:

"This lady desires a room where she may rest unmolested after her journey. Let such refreshment as

you have be instantly prepared. The lady will lunch in her room, and I will eat wherever pleases you. Send as speedily as possible, food and wine to my servant, who remains with my boat by the landing."

The host made no reply, but turned his lowering look upon the officers, as if waiting for word from one or all of them.

"You hear his Lordship's commands, I hope," roared Beilstein, "the best in the house for the lady and that without delay. The gentleman will doubtless wish to remain here and make the acquaintance of three good fellows."

The innkeeper, telling the Countess briefly to follow him, led the way within. Rodolph was about to enter the court-yard, when the stalwart Captain blocked his way, standing with feet set wide apart before him.

"Friend," began the Captain, genially, "we fall on turbulent times, when each man is suspicious of his neighbour. You have little objection, doubtless, to inform us who you are and why you travel."

"None at all," replied Rodolph. "I am a merchant of Frankfort; I journeyed to Treves, transacted there my business and am now returning to Frankfort by way of Coblentz."

"And the lady?"

"The lady is my sister. The two with us are our servants."

"You have little room in your craft for merchandise."

"We came to Treves on horseback by the Roman road, the merchandise carried by mules. It is now sold and thus I return empty-handed."

"Not entirely empty-handed, I trust, for you must have received something by way of honest recompense for honest merchandise. If you sent your gold back to Frankfort by the way the goods came, and now journey down the Moselle with barely enough to pay the innkeeper here for what you have of him, that, I

fear, will be looked on by the virtuous barons as a slight upon their probity, and some may hold you to ransom merely to show all future travellers that the noble river is not to be thus lightly dealt with. But, as I before proclaimed to you, we live in a suspicious time, and you, probably do not expect your bare word to be taken regarding your quality. I need hardly ask you if there is in your possession some slight document having reference to your occupation."

"I have a passport, which I shall be pleased to exhibit on being assured of the right of any questioner to demand it."

"I am Captain of the forces here, stationed to serve my Lord, the Count of Beilstein, one of the three overlords of Bruttig. By consent of my two colleagues of Treves and Winneburg I am Captain of the Day, responsible to my master and to them that no traitors come within our precincts. If further warrant of my right to question is required, then my good two-handed sword stands sponsor to me, dealing forth argument that few care to controvert. Is it your pleasure that I call upon it to set any doubts at rest concerning my authority?"

"Not so. The word of an officer is at all times sufficient for me. I merely desired to know to whom I should have the honour of submitting this document for inspection," saying which Rodolph handed to the officer his passport, although it was evident a moment later that the worthy man, brave soldier as he might be, could not read it. He turned it over and over in his hand, then glanced at the Captain of the Elector, who watched him with a smile.

"This seems in proper form," said Beilstein, shrugging his shoulders, "but you soldiers of the Church are on terms of acquaintance with these characters, which are denied to us who are more practised at arms than with the pen. Construe for us the sheet, Elector." The Captain of the Elector took the parchment and cast his eye over it.

"There is nothing here of a sister, merchant," he said, looking at Rodolph.

"It is not customary in Frankfort," replied Rodolph, "to take much account of our women. They come and go as they please, providing they are accompanied by a relative or guardian who possesses a proper passport."

"Frankfort customs hold not on the banks of the Moselle," said Beilstein, menacingly.

"Did your sister enter and leave Treves under this passport?" asked the Elector.

"Freely."

"Unquestioned?"

"Absolutely unquestioned."

"Did the Archbishop know of her presence?"

"She had the honour of appearing at the Archbishop's Court."

"Hum!" ejaculated the Captain of the Elector, doubtingly, lowering at the polite stranger suspiciously from under his bushy eyebrows. "The manners of his Lordship's Court must have changed since I knew aught of them, if Arnold von Isenberg invites Frankfort merchants to his circle."

"We have the privilege of being vouched for by Baron Siegfried von Brunfels, now in Treves. I may also add that although I engage in traffic, there is no plebeian blood in my veins."

The Elector's Captain handed the passport back to Beilstein, saying in an undertone, "I should not meddle with these people were I in your stead. 'Tis likely what he says may be true."

"And what is that to me?" cried Beilstein, angrily. "Bruttig is not under the jurisdiction of Arnold von Isenberg alone, nor will Winneburg or Beilstein suffer sole jurisdiction to be claimed by him under any pretence whatever. Speak I not true, Winneburg?"

"Aye," agreed Winneburg's Captain cordially, "and this party falls to you by fair agreement previously made."

"I have put forward no claim to special jurisdiction," said the Elector. "I gave a hint to a friend that it is ill meddling with any pet of the Lion of Treves. You may act on it or not, as pleases you. I shall not interfere unless the merchant here brings me written message from Arnold von Isenberg. Have you any such, sir? If so, give it to me before mistakes are made."

The trend of the discussion showed Rodolph that he was in danger of some kind, which might require all his craft to avoid, for if it came to blows he stood no chance whatever. He also realised that hope lay in winning to his side the good will of the Archbishop's Captain, and, if possible, in gaining some assurance of the neutrality of Winneburg's man. He imagined, however, that he saw a disposition on the part of the two local authorities to stand together against the Archbishop, and a reluctance on the part of the Archbishop's delegate to force matters to an issue. It was, all in all, a most difficult position.

"I have a message from the Archbishop to you, but it will please him better if I am not compelled to deliver it. We are peaceful travellers in his lordship's domains, and have a right to pass on our way without hindrance."

The surly host at this moment came out and announced that the meal was prepared. A lad passed through with a loaf and a measure of wine for Conrad. Rodolph, bowing to the three officers, followed the host.

"What do you propose to do?" asked Winneburg.

"I can tell you better when I have had a glimpse of the maiden. If she suits my fancy I shall have a broadsword bout with the brother, by way of introducing myself amicably to the family."

"Not the best method, perhaps, of commending yourself to the lady, whether victor or vanquished."

"The strong hand, Winneburg, is ever the surest, whether it grasps girl or gold."

The officer of the Archbishop remained silent, while the other two discussed the question. Something in the manner of Rodolph impressed him with the belief that the young man spoke as one having authority, and he knew that if a mistake were made, Arnold von Isenberg was one to punish first and weigh excuses after. He knew that if he opposed Beilstein, or even tendered advice, the obstinate officer would the more surely persist in whatever course he had marked out for himself, so he resolved to maintain silence and keep a watchful eye, governing his actions by whatever might befall. With a scarcely perceptible signal to his lieutenant, he conveyed a message to him that seemed to be instantly understood, for the subordinate at once set himself quietly to the gathering of his men, who grouped themselves round in an apparently casual manner, and remained within call.

While Beilstein and Winneburg were conversing Rodolph reappeared, with the Countess and her maid accompanying him. The sun had already begun to decline far in the west, and the cloudless sky gave promise of a fine summer evening. Beilstein strode forward.

"I have questioned your brother, my girl," he said, "and now, by your leave, I would have a word or two with you. But first draw aside your veil that we may all see whom we have had the pleasure of entertaining in our poor town of Bruttig."

The Countess shrank timidly from him without speaking, and Rodolph at once stepped between her and the officer.

"Sir," he said, gravely, "I have answered all your questions fairly and fully. If you have more to ask, propound them, I beg of you, to me, and I shall again reply until you are satisfied."

"Merchant," cried the officer, working himself into an anger, "your passport makes no mention of this lady. I must therefore look upon her face and judge if there is any sisterly likeness that may give colour of

truth to your words. Madame, remove your veil, and put me not to the disagreeable duty of tearing it from your face."

"Is it possible, gentlemen," said Rodolph to the other two, "that a lady is to be thus insulted in your presence, and am I to take it that we can look for no protection from you?"

"It is none of my affair," said Winneburg, impartially.

"I can act only on the written authority of the Archbishop or on the spoken word of a superior officer, whom I personally know," replied the Archbishop's man, with a keen glance at Rodolph, which said as plainly as words, "If you have such authority, in God's name, produce it."

Rodolph, turning to the Countess, whispered, "Slip away to the boat while I hold this fellow in check. Get in and tell Conrad to push out into mid-stream. Float down the river and if I do not overtake you along the bank, hurry on alone to your journey's end."

"Sir," he said to the officer, "if you do not wish your own master to curse your interference, you will allow me to go my way without further question."

"Then you shall explain to my master who you are. Come back!" he cried to the Countess, who was hurrying down the slope, and he would have followed after her, but Rodolph, whipping out his slender rapier, stood squarely in the way.

"Ho, there, men of Beilstein!" shouted the officer, "stop those women. Tie me up that fellow at the boat, and cast the boat adrift. Now my fine merchant you have at last found your toy weapon. Is it your purpose to stand against me with that shivering reed?"

"I will do my best, if you insist on an encounter, which I beg of you and your comrades to note I have tried my utmost to avoid. But in fairness allow my sister to go, and wreak your vengeance on me alone. When did you men of the Moselle begin to war on women?"

“The woman shall be the prize of the contest,” said the officer, confidently.

The other two looked on in amazement. The rapier was entirely unknown throughout Germany and had only recently come into use in Italy, where Rodolph, dwelling as he did, on the borders of that country, had learned its deadly use. The giant swung his two-handed sword once or twice round his head, and in a loud voice asked his antagonist if he were ready. Rodolph answered nothing, but threw away his cloak, which he would have used as an article of defence had he been opposed to one similarly armed to himself, knowing that in this encounter he must depend on his agility for his safety, and to the cumbrous nature of his opponent's blade, for his chance of attack. The battle was over almost before the spectators knew it had begun. Beilstein brought down an overhead swirl of his heavy blade which would assuredly have annihilated any living thing it encountered, but Rodolph sprang nimbly aside and when the blade struck the earth he darted sharply forward, thrusting the thin rapier through the officer's neck, the only unprotected vital part of his body, springing back again out of arm's length in an instant. The giant strove to raise his blade, but the effort caused a red jet of blood to leap from his throat, and spatter down upon his breast-plate. Rodolph stood apart, braced and alert, the sting of death held tense in his hand, showing not a trace of blood on its shining, needle-like length. No groan escaped the Captain, but a pallor overspread his swarthy face; he swayed to and fro like a tottering oak, apparently upheld by his huge sword, the point of which he had been unable to extricate from the earth. Then he suddenly collapsed, and came, with a clash of armour, to the ground.

The horrified lieutenant of Beilstein, seeing his master thus unaccountably slain, at once raised the cry of “Beilstein.”

“Up! men of Beilstein!” he roared. “Your master

is murdered. Surround his assassin and take him, dead or alive, to the castle. Beilstein! Beilstein!"

"I ask your protection, gentlemen," appealed Rodolph, turning to the remaining officers. "I claim adherence to the rule of the combat. I fought reluctantly, and only by compulsion. I demand the right to go without further opposition."

"Beilstein! Beilstein! Beilstein!" The cry echoed through the town and soldiers came running from all quarters with weapons drawn.

"He speaks truth," said the Elector's man. "He has won his liberty, and may go for all I care."

"Not so," cried Winneburg. "It was no fair contest, but devil's swordplay. To the castle with him and his brood."

The angry soldiery now pressed round Rodolph, but took good care to keep out of the reach of his flashing weapon.

"Get a pike," said one; "that will outreach him."

"Pikes, lances, pikes!" ran from mouth to mouth. Rodolph saw he must speedily be overpowered, and a scream from the affrighted women in the hands of the soldiery decided him to try a desperate remedy for a desperate case.

He sprang upon the prostrate body of his foe, and towering over the heads of the clamouring throng, raised his sword aloft and shouted, "The Archbishop! The lady is the Countess Tekla, ward of Arnold von Isenburg, insulted by these Moselle ruffians, while you cravens stand by and see it done. Officer, you have already nearly compassed your own damnation. Redeem yourself by instantly falling to the rescue. Treves! Treves! Is there an Archbishop's man within hearing? Treves! Treves! Treves!"

The Archbishop's officer at once gave the word, and his men, beating down opposition, formed around Rodolph and the Countess. Winneburg stood undecided, and before he made up his mind, the fight was over, the Beilstein men being demoralised for lack of a leader.

"You have entangled us in this affair," said the officer to Rodolph, "and if you have cried the Archbishop's name unwarranted, your head is likely to roll off in consequence. I have seen the Countess Tekla. Will she, therefore unveil so that I may be sure I have not been deluded, or do you prefer to wait until I hear from his Lordship?"

Before Rodolph could reply, the Countess threw back her veil.

"I am indeed, as you see, the Countess Tekla, ward of the Archbishop," she said.

"A fine watch you keep on the Moselle," cried Rodolph, with simulated indignation, "when the Countess Tekla cannot journey to her guardian's Castle of Cochem without having his Lordship insulted in her person by unmannerly marauders at Bruttig, where he supposes he holds through you, control and safe-conduct for all properly authenticated travellers!"

The officer bowed low to the Countess and to Rodolph.

"I crave your Lordship's indulgence and forgiveness. Had you but given me the slightest hint of this I would have protected you."

"I gave you all the hint I could, but you paid little heed to it."

"I am deeply to blame, and I implore your intercession with my Lord the Archbishop. I will myself, with a troop of horse, instantly escort you to Cochem and see you safely bestowed there."

"All I ask of you is to secure our boat and let us depart as we came."

"Alas! the boat is gone, and is now most likely half-way to Cochem. Shall I order you accommodation here until you can communicate with the Archbishop?"

"No, we will at once to Cochem. Have you horses for the Countess and myself and for our servants?"

"Yes, my Lord."

“Then we will set out on our journey as soon as they are ready.”

The officer saluted, and departed to give his orders.

“What shall we do? oh, what shall we do?” asked the Countess, wringing her hands.

“Do not be afraid,” said Rodolph, with a confidence he did not himself feel. “We will be so much the further from Treves and so much the nearer to Thuron. We will ride side by side to Cochem, and then consult on what is best to be done when we get there. Meanwhile, keep a firm command of your agitation, and do not show fear. The officer has no suspicion, and will do whatever I ask of him. They, perhaps, do not know yet of your flight at Treves, and even if they did they cannot get here much before this time to-morrow, and not then unless they come by boat. Have no fear; I will, as I promised, see you safe in Thuron gate.”

The Countess impulsively held out her hand, and gave a warm pressure to the one extended to her.

“Forgive me,” she whispered, “for my distrust of you last night. You are a brave and true soldier.”

CHAPTER IX.

A PALATIAL PRISON.

THE Captain presently appeared with a dozen mounted men at his back, and four led horses.

"I hold it well," he said to Rodolph, "to get as speedily away from Bruttig as may be. The lieutenant of Count Beilstein has gone in haste to the castle to tell his Highness what has happened, and it was not within my right to detain him. The Count will be beside himself with rage at the loss of his Captain, so it is safer that you lodge within Castle Cochem as soon as possible. He will think twice before he attacks the Archbishop's stronghold. Is it your will that I send a messenger to Treves to acquaint his Lordship with the welfare of his ward?"

"That is not necessary," replied Rodolph. "The Archbishop will doubtless prefer to hear of our safe arrival at Cochem, and a messenger can be sent from there. Is there a chance that we may be intercepted by the forces of Count Beilstein?"

"No interception is possible. His men here are without a leader, and will attempt nothing, even if they were able to accomplish anything. The Count himself will likely come in haste to Bruttig, but by that time we shall be in Cochem, I hope and although the road by the river is none of the best, it is as bad for him as for us."

"Let us get on, then," said Rodolph. He assisted the Countess to mount, sprang into his own saddle, and felt that exhilaration which comes to a horseman when he finds a spirited steed under him.

Four of the cavalry headed the procession, with

eight to bring up the rear, the Countess and her attendants riding between. Rodolph rode by the side of the Countess, with Conrad and Hilda out of earshot behind them, the Captain leading the four horsemen in front. Their rough way led along the right bank of the river.

"Nothing has been heard from the Archbishop, I trust," said the Countess.

"There is little to fear from him until late to-morrow, and not even then unless your escape was discovered early to-day—a most unlikely event."

"But might not the pursuers ride all night?"

"A difficult and hazardous task they would set themselves in passing through the forest in the dark, and slow work even if successfully accomplished."

"Then we need have no apprehension if we can get clear of Cochem before the pursuers from Treves arrive at Bruttig?"

"Once quit of Cochem, pursuit will be futile. My plan is to keep a sharp look-out for the drifting boat. Conrad will secure it if possible, and we will get away from Cochem to-night, if we can leave the castle; but I know nothing of its conformation, nor of how it is guarded."

The Countess shook her head. "I am afraid it will be difficult to leave Cochem at night," she said. "The castle is always well and strictly guarded, and occupies an almost inaccessible position on the top of a hill."

"There is nothing for it then but to go with this escort to Cochem, and trust to Providence and our own ingenuity thereafter. I may have something to suggest when I have seen the place."

The increasing roughness of the road made conversation more and more difficult. An hour's riding and a turn in the river brought them in sight of the grand castle of Cochem, its numerous pinnacles glittering in the last rays of the setting sun. It was another hour before the cavalcade arrived opposite the place. A

trumpeter of the troop blew a bugle blast that was echoed back from the rock-ribbed conical hill on which the castle stood. The signal was answered by another from the ramparts of the fortification itself, and presently a boat put out from the foot of the rock. In this boat the Countess and her attendant were placed, while those on horseback set their steeds to the swift current and landed some distance below, at the lower end of the little village that clustered from the foot of the hill, extending down the valley. The Countess mounted her dripping horse, and the troop rode slowly up a winding path that partly encircled the vine-clad hill, and at last arrived at the northern gate, which was the chief entrance to the castle. Here, after a brief parley, the portcullis was raised and the party admitted to a large courtyard that hung high above the Moselle, overlooking a long stretch of the river as it flowed toward the Rhine.

The custodian of the castle received his distinguished guest with that humble deference which befitted her lofty station, assisting her to dismount and evidently entertaining not the remotest suspicion that the visit was unauthorised. The Countess enacted her part well.

"I commend to your care," she said, imperiously, "my Lord Rodolph, who has conducted me from Treves. Until the Archbishop himself arrives you are to hold yourself entirely at his orders."

The custodian bowed low, first to the Countess and then to Rodolph.

"How soon may we look for his Highness the Archbishop?" he asked.

"You will most likely hear from him to-morrow. Is my suite of apartments ready?"

"They are now being prepared as speedily as possible; but as no messenger brought us word of your coming, I hope your Ladyship will pardon the delay," answered the custodian, with some trepidation.

The Countess made no reply, but with her whip beckoned Rodolph to her side.

"Do the troopers remain in the castle, or return to Bruttig to-night?"

"I have told their officer to keep them here until morning. If a messenger from the Archbishop arrives at Bruttig sooner than we look for, he will likely remain there until this officer returns. The Archbishop would count on the Captain being at his post, and it is not likely that the messenger's instructions would run further than Bruttig, which will give us further time."

"Will you then give your commands to the custodian regarding the disposal of the men? I think he will obey you; but it is well to discover this by bestowing orders first that are unimportant, before we put our power to a supreme test."

Rodolph gave directions, which, to his relief, were instantly obeyed. The custodian escorted Countess Tekla into the castle, while Rodolph walked round the courtyard to get some idea of the lay of the land and the construction of the fortifications. The view down the river was magnificent, as also was the outlook up the Endertsbach valley, with the huge round tower of Count Winneburg's castle standing out against the evening sky, built on a hill nearly equal in height to the one crowned by Schloss Cochem.

Rodolph's short examination of the castle's position speedily showed him that it was a place difficult to get into or escape from. To steal away at night was hardly practicable, unless one had a ladder of ropes, while to escape by day was equally hopeless, as a fugitive could be seen for miles in any direction until he was lost in the forest.

As the Emperor stood at the corner of the elevated terrace, gazing down the river, he became aware of some one's approach, and a moment later the deferential voice of the aged custodian broke the silence.

"A goodly sight, my Lord," he said, "and although I have looked at it for many a year, it never becomes less lovely to my eyes. It is rarely the same, varying with every change in the atmosphere, but always beautiful."

"It is indeed a marvelous view, and not to be the less enjoyed because your position up here is well nigh impregnable," answered Rodolph.

"Altogether so, I think," replied the custodian, with the pride of an old retainer in his castle and a belief in its unassailability, the result of many futile assaults he had seen. "Before Cochem falls the souls of hundreds of its assailants will seek a final abiding place, in bliss or other where, as God wills."

"Does the road we came by from Bruttig, follow the river further down?"

"No, my Lord, it ends opposite the castle. On this side, however, there is a path that follows the river from village to village, but how far it goes, I do not know, for I never explored it to the end."

"Are there many castles between here and the Rhine?"

"Only three or four, some standing back from the river in the valleys that run into the Moselle. The chief castle is that of the Black Count, robber and marauder that he is, and it is called Thuron. Were it less strong, I think the good Archbishop would have smoked him out long ere this. Count Heinrich has a chain across the river, stopping all honest traffic until tribute is paid, and if there is any cavilling about it, he takes the whole cargo and casts the merchant into a dungeon to teach him respect for the nobility, as he says. But some day there will be a reckoning, for Black Heinrich, while compelling due respect to be paid by all inferiors, is himself most disdainful to those above him."

"Flouts he the Emperor, then?"

"Oh, the Emperor!" said the custodian, with a shrug of his shoulders, that might have been held con-

temptuous, "the Emperor is but a name, and commands scant respect along the Moselle. He is some young man recently elected, who loves better the dallying of his Court than the risking of good stout blows in the field. They tell me he comes from a noble family in Switzerland, and is not of Germany at all, and I warrant the Archbishop does not wait to ask his leave if he wishes to pull down a castle about the ears of a truculent Baron.

"Then it seems to me our friend, the Archbishop, may be accused of the same want of respect for higher authority that you lay at the door of Count Heinrich the Black."

"The worthy Archbishop, God bless him, recognises no over-lord but the Pope himself, and I have sometimes doubted whether Arnold von Isenberg paid very much attention even to his Holiness; but then I am letting my tongue run away with me, and am talking of what concerns me not."

"It will do you no harm as long as I am the sole listener. Does Castle Thuron stand on this side of the river or on the other?"

"On the other. It crowns a hill somewhat similar to this and as high, but it is as unlike Cochem as one castle can be unlike another, for this is part palace and part fortress, while Thuron is a fortress pure and simple, and a strong one at that. A stout wall has been built from the castle down to the river, and it is said that there is a passage within, where ten men can walk abreast, although that I doubt. There is certainly a passage by which food or water can be taken up to the castle, while the carriers pass unscathed, protected by strong stone walls."

"It seems, then, that the first duty of besiegers would be to break that wall, and thus cut communication between the castle and the river."

"That is easy to suggest, but there would be difficulty in the doing. The walls are stout and will stand some battering; then the two great round towers

of the castle are armed with catapults which, they say, will fling round stones even across the river itself. Besides this, there are engines along the wall for a similar purpose. The attacking party would have to remove solid cemented stone, while the defenders would merely have to sweep down along the hillside unprotected men who had little to cling to. I think it is no secret that the Archbishop had Thuron examined by spies with a view to its capture, but they strongly advised him to leave it alone; safe counsel, which his Lordship followed."

"When the assault takes place I hope we shall be there to see."

"Ah," said the ancient keeper, with a sigh of regret, "I fear I shall have no such pleasure, for I grow old and Arnold grows cautious. My only hope comes from Heinrich himself, for he is like enough to hurl some insult at the Archbishop that cannot well result in anything but the uprising of pikes; indeed, he once threatened to attack Cochem itself, and for a day or two we had merry preparation, but he thought better of it, and no more came of the threat, much to my regret, for I should have liked to see Heinrich crack his crown against Cochem. And now, my Lord, if you will come within, you will find a meal prepared, for which I doubt not you have sufficient appetite."

The young man and the old entered the castle together.

CHAPTER X.

THE INTERCEPTED FUGITIVES.

IN spite of his anxiety, Rodolph slept that night with a soundness that carried him, unconscious, further into the morning than he had intended when he lay down. It had been his purpose to rise early, and perfect some scheme for quitting the castle without arousing the suspicions of its inmates. The getting off, he knew, must be accomplished that day, and as soon as possible in the day, for undoubtedly the pursuers of the Countess must now be well down the river.

The Emperor, on breakfasting, learned that the Countess had been up long before, and was at that moment praying in the chapel. The Captain and the escort had left for Bruttig, and when Rodolph went out upon the terrace he saw the band far below, climbing up the opposite bank on dripping horses, rising from the clear waters like spirits of the river, into the thin transparent mist that floated over the stream. The morning sun was gently gathering up the airy, white coverlet of the Moselle, promising a clear and brilliant day. The troop below, seen dimly through the intervening haze, had formed in regular order, two and two, the Captain at their head, with the Archbishop's pennant flying above them, and were now trotting slowly up the river road.

"Always beautiful, and never the same, changing with every hour of the day. In a short time the slight fog will have lifted, and the heightening sun will reveal the full glory of the view."

Rodolph turned quickly and saw standing at his

elbow the old custodian of the place, as he had stood on the same spot the evening before.

The young man wondered if any suspicion of the real state of the case had entered the custodian's mind; whether his cat-like steps and unexpected appearances, his haunting of his guest, did not betoken some distrust that all was not as it should be. The custodian had likely learned from the Captain that the Countess came from Treves to Bruttig in a small boat, practically without escort, and that there was trouble before the identity of the party had been disclosed. On the other hand the custodian must know that the Archbishop often adopted a course of action, the object of which was known to none but himself, and his Lordship had small patience with any underling who exhibited inconvenient curiosity regarding the intentions of those above him. Rodolph resolved to set his doubts at rest by a practical test.

"The day," he said, "indeed promises to be fine. To a man of action, however, the precincts of the castle are somewhat circumscribed, and the marvellous view makes him more and more conscious of the limited extent of this most charming terrace. Has the Archbishop some good horses in his stables, or does he keep them all at Treves?"

"His Lordship has a rare fondness for a choice bit of horse-flesh, and there is here an ample variety. Does your Lordship wish to ride this morning?"

"Is the country round about safe? I have no desire to be captured and thus put the Archbishop to the trouble of knocking down some castle in effecting my rescue."

"The district is reasonably safe. Perhaps it may be well not to venture into the territory of the Count of Winneburg, up the valley of Endertsbach yonder, but down the river there is little chance of molestation; still, I can provide you with an escort that will most likely leave you free from attack wherever you go."

"No," said Rodolph, with unconcern. "It is not

worth while to turn out a guard, besides the Archbishop himself may be here at any moment and I think he would like to find the whole garrison ready to receive him, although he said nothing to me about it."

"Yes, Arnold von Isenberg does not overlook scant ceremony when he takes himself abroad. Would you care to see the horses, my Lord?"

Rodolph thanked his host for the invitation, and together they went to the stables, where he selected four horses, and directed that they should be accoutred for riding, two for women and two for men.

"The Countess," he said, to the custodian, "has been accustomed to out-door recreation, and is an excellent horsewoman. I am sure she will desire to take advantage of this exhilarating morning, but I shall now wait upon her and learn her wishes."

To the Emperor's relief, the custodian remained behind to see that the orders were promptly carried out, while Rodolph went back to the castle. He sought the chapel, which was reached by passing through the castle and crossing another courtyard looking toward the west. The chapel at the south-west angle of the castle seemed to hang over the river, standing as it did on a projecting rock, whose straight sides formed a perpendicular cliff, rising like a castle wall from the deep slope of the hill. The chapel was a small but very perfect bit of ecclesiastical architecture, recently built by Arnold von Isenberg himself. As Rodolph entered the vestibule he was met by the Countess hurrying out.

"Oh, my Lord, my Lord," she cried, with agitation in her voice, "the troops of the Archbishop are now coming down the river. I have seen them from the window within." Rodolph closed the door of the chapel so that they might not be overheard.

"I think," he said, "that the men you saw are those who left us this morning. They are the troops of the Archbishop indeed, but they are going toward Bruttig."

"No, no. Hilda has been watching them for a long time, while I prayed before the altar. Just now she told me she saw a troop meeting those who escorted us hither. Come and see."

The interior of the chapel was in dim-coloured obscurity, all the windows being of glass, sombrely stained. The lower part of one window looking to the south-west opened on hinges, and there Hilda stood gazing up the river. For a long distance the Moselle ran straight toward them, apparently broadening as it approached. Far away Rodolph saw the two troops meet, but the distance was too great for him to distinguish whose flag flew over the further party.

"It may be that they are retainers of Count Beilstein," said the Emperor. "If it should so chance, there is like to be a hostile meeting. If they belong to the Archbishop, there will be a short conference, then all will probably return to Cochem."

As he spoke the approaching troops came together and it was soon evident that they had no hostile intentions towards each other. A cry from the Countess called his attention to the fact that one horseman was hurrying alone toward Bruttig, and that all the rest were riding at increased speed for Cochem.

"There are four horses now ready in the courtyard. Countess, I beg of you to appear calm and to show no haste in getting away. We will ride slowly to the river and then into the forest; after that we will make what speed we may to Thuron, and I much doubt if those who follow will have sight of us before we reach the castle."

The Countess and Hilda went to their apartments to prepare for the journey, while Rodolph sought Conrad, and told him briefly that he was to make ready for travel.

The four horses with their attendants stood in the courtyard, and presently the Countess appeared coming leisurely down the steps, followed by Hilda. The

ancient custodian busied himself in seeing that everything was to the liking of his guests. The gates were thrown open, and the portcullis gradually raised with much creaking of rusty chain. The small cavalcade rode slowly forth, down the winding way, while the old guardian of the castle stood watching them as they descended.

No word was spoken until they had rounded the hill and once more caught a glimpse of the river. The shoulder of the promontory on the opposite side cut off their view of the Bruttig road, and there was, as yet, no sign of the oncoming troop.

"Even if there was only the river between us," said Rodolph, reassuringly, "we should win the race, for their horses are tired, and ours are fresh and of the best. We can surely ride as fast as they along a road that is not well adapted for speed; the good custodian told me it is but a path, and he seemed uncertain how far even that extended. Everything is in our favour, and so far as I can learn, nothing but a few leagues of forest and the waters of this river are between us and Thuron gate."

"Is the castle, then, on the other side?" asked the Countess.

"Yes, but the path, such as it is, is on this, and I have no doubt our horses, accustomed to the river, will make little of swimming across, when we catch a glimpse of the two round towers of Thuron."

"I can scarcely believe that we have come so easily forth from yon stronghold, for last night my heart sank within me as I heard the clang of the portcullis descending, and it seemed to me that we were trapped beyond hope of rescue."

"You showed little fear, Countess, if, indeed, you felt any, which from your words and manner at the time, I am inclined to doubt."

The Countess shook her head. "I quaked with fear, nevertheless," she said, simply, glancing sideways at him.

Reaching the foot of the hill they made their way, still without haste, along the front of the village, which straggled for some hundreds of yards facing the river. A short distance below Cochem the cliffs projected to the Moselle, and the path struggled up the hill in zig-zag fashion, finally forming a narrow cornice road running parallel with the stream, but high above it, and when at last it descended to a lower level Cochem Castle was finally shut from their view as they looked backward. Rodolph, who was leading, now put spurs to his horse, and the rest of the company came trotting behind as best they could, Conrad bringing up the rear. The path kept mostly along the margin of the stream, frequently diverging into the forest, and then always mounting upwards, to pass some obstacle where the banks were steep and the waters of the Moselle lapped the face of the rocks. On every height Rodolph paused till the others came up with him, and looked anxiously back where the trees permitted a retrospect, but no sign of pursuit was ever visible. Thuron Castle stood but five leagues from Cochem, and between the two places the river ran nearly in a direct line, forgetting the crooked eccentricities that had marked its progress further up. The roughness of the path and its numerous divergencies from the level made it difficult for the riders to accomplish more than a league an hour. They had been four hours on the journey when Rodolph called Conrad to his side, and said to him :

“Have you any knowledge of the distance still between us and Thuron ?”

“No, my Lord. I have no acquaintance with the river below Cochem.”

“The sun is at least two hours past meridian, and we must have food. Ride on to yonder village and see if they will prepare something for us.”

“My Lord, knowing how badly travellers fare who depend on chance foraging down this valley, I brought with me from Cochem a skin of wine and food enough

for half a dozen. We might rest on the hill top after passing through the village and there eat."

"Your foresight was wise in one way and dangerous in another. Asking for food and wine might have aroused suspicion in the castle, although apparently it has not done so."

"I took none into my confidence, my Lord. The buttery is well provided, and they keep not such strict watch on it as they do at the outer gate. I was bidden go there and refresh myself; which I did, and then took with me what was most portable, palatable and sustaining."

"In that case you are to be commended as a more thoughtful campaigner than myself, but, in truth, I was so anxious to get out of the castle I thought little of bringing anything else with me than those in my charge."

Passing through the village, which they learned was called Hattonis Porta, from the hill that overshadowed it to the east, they began the ascent that was to bring them to their resting-place. The top of the hill commanded the valley up the Moselle for a distance of two or three leagues, and they would thus have ample notice of pursuit, and might therefore lunch in peace. Furthermore, when Rodolph reached the top, he was delighted to see but a short distance further on, and across the river which, rounding the promontory, turned toward the north, the two grey towers of a strong castle, which from the description he had received of it, he instantly knew to be Thuron; thus their journey's end was in plain sight. The empty road far up the river gave him assurance that, should the enemy appear in view, there was ample time for them to cross the river and reach the castle before they were even caught sight of by their pursuers. Rodolph slipped from his horse and stood there awaiting the arrival of the Countess, whose tired steed was coming slowly up the hill. Before he assisted her to dismount he pointed out the castle.

"There, my Lady," he said, "is the residence of the Count, your uncle, and the end of your toilsome march."

"Now may the saints be thanked for their protection," cried the wearied girl. "How I have prayed this some time past for a sight of those towers!"

She slipped from her horse into his arms, and he held her perhaps a moment longer than was necessary to set her safely on the turf. If the lady resented this, she at least made no complaint about it, but the colour came swiftly to her fair face, and she sighed, probably because the haven was so near.

Conrad and Hilda now came up, and assisted each other in setting forth the meal that the former had brought from Cochem. Then the horses cropped the grass near by, securely tethered, as Tekla and Rodolph took their repast together, while Hilda and Conrad did likewise at a little distance.

"What do you propose to do when we reach Thuron?" asked the Countess.

"I shall first offer some good advice to the Count Heinrich, if he will listen to me."

"What advice?"

"To provision his castle instantly for the coming siege."

"The coming siege? I do not understand you. The country is at peace."

"True, but the peace will be speedily broken. The Archbishop will invest Thuron Castle as soon as he can collect his forces."

The Countess looked at him for some moments with dilated eyes, in which apprehension grew more and more pronounced.

"Do you mean that there will be war because—because of me?"

"Most certainly. Did you not know that?"

The girl arose and regarded him with ever-increasing dismay.

"I shall return instantly to Cochem," she said, at

last. "I will give myself up to the Archbishop. There shall not be bloodshed on my account, no matter what happens to me."

The Emperor smiled at her agitation, and her innocence at not in the least appreciating the inevitable consequence of her revolt.

"You will do nothing so foolish," he said. "Besides, you are under my command until I deliver you safely to your uncle, and I assure you I permit no rebellion in my camp. Even if you returned to the Archbishop you would merely consign yourself to a prison, and would not prevent a conflict. I understand that your uncle has on more than one occasion demanded the custody of your person, and the crafty Archbishop would never believe that he had no hand in your flight. His Lordship has for some time been meditating an attack on Thuron, and I learned at Cochem that the devout Arnold recently sent spies to discover how best the castle might be taken; so it is more than likely you are doing your uncle the greatest service in giving him warning of a struggle which is hardly preventable, and which might, at any moment, have taken him unaware."

"A siege!" said the Countess, clasping her hands before her, speaking more to herself than to her listener and gazing across the blue river at the two grim grey towers on the hill top. "A siege of Castle Thuron?" Then turning suddenly on Rodolph and flashing upon him a swift bewildering glance of her splendid eyes, speaking rapidly, she asked:

"Will you be in the castle during the conflict?"

"I most sincerely hope and trust I shall," cried the young man, fervently. The girl drew a deep breath that was almost a sigh, but said nothing. Rodolph stretched forth his hand to her and she put her hand in his, looking frankly into his honest face. No speech but that of their eyes passed between them. But there ran rapidly through her mind the thought that had the Archbishop endeavoured to force her to marry a

man like Lord Rodolph, she might never have sought escape from Treves.

Conrad at this point interrupted them.

"My Lord," he said, "there is one coming up the hill, who looks like the archer."

The Emperor rose, and accompanied Conrad to the brow of the descent, with some anxiety, fearing that the newcomer might prove to be one of the pursuers who had somehow escaped his vigilance. There was, however, no cause for alarm; a moment's glance showed that it was indeed the archer, who being stout and cumbered by pike, cloak, and various belongings, with longbow slung over his shoulder, toiled somewhat slowly up the steep ascent, pausing now and then to mop his brow and gaze around him, a habit of caution learned during the years of campaigning. On catching sight of the two men standing above him he stopped, took the bow from his shoulder, strung it, gazing up at them for a moment, then mounted leisurely as before, ready for any greeting he might receive.

When within earshot he again stood still, and accosting the two, said:

"Good day to your honours, who seem to be men of peace and but scantily armed, the which makes it most unlikely that you can be of that service to me which doubtless your good nature would give you pleasure in rendering. I am, as you may have noticed, a man accustomed to the wars, and now on the outlook for some noble who has quarrels on hand and the will to pay for a skilful archer who, I may say in all modesty, seeing there is none to testify on my behalf, never misses a mark he aims at, providing the object be but a fair and reasonable distance away. I am desirous of taking upon me the quarrel of any such noble, all the better pleased if the quarrel be just, but not looking too closely into the merits of the dispute, as experience has shown me that few controversies exist, in which there is not something

to be said for both sides; the only conditions I would be inclined to impose being that pay should be reasonably sure, and that the provender, such as a man may require to keep him in health, be ample, for a taut string is of little use unless there be good muscle behind it."

"Well and truly spoken, Sir Archer," cried Rodolph, "and inaccurate only in one detail, which is that there stands a man before you who can testify most enthusiastically regarding your skill with the bow. Then you have not yet won your way to the Rhine?"

"Ah, my Lord, is it indeed you? I thought there was something familiar in your appearance; but I saw you before for a short time only, and that at night. Although I spoke just now of taking service with any noble who might be in need of a man-at-arms, still I hold myself in some measure as being under your orders, for I accepted from you three months' pay, and while it is true that I have had to provide food at my own expense and lodging where night overtook me, still neither the quality nor cost of either has been such as to invalidate our bargain, should you care to hold me to it. Of the food along the Moselle I can truly and of experience say it is most vile and swinish, always excepting the supper and breakfast provided me by the good fellow who stands at your side, and who is, if I mistake not, the same whom your comrade, having small knowledge of the dignity of archery, the which is only what might have been expected of him, being an untaught German, desired me to execute by driving a good shaft through him at three yards or so distance."

"You have fallen among friends," said the Emperor, "and although I fear, that, if your fasting has been involuntary, you can claim little credit from it for the benefit of your soul, yet we are happily in a position to give you one good meal, which will banish the remembrance of hunger and at least afford temporary benefit to your body."

“I am loath to say that I give little thought to my soul,” replied the archer, promptly advancing when he became aware that there was sustenance on the top of the hill, “and I minister unto it perhaps as much as any man now under arms in Germany, which is not high recommendation; still the body has a practice of pressing its claims upon a man’s mind in a way that will not be denied, and therefore I accept with most hearty gratitude any victual that your Lordship may have at your disposal, and I trust that in the provisioning of your expedition such an important item as that of drink has not been forgotten.”

“Your faith in the thoughtfulness of our caterer is far from being misplaced. I can guarantee you wine as good as the Archbishop himself keeps in his cellars.”

The archer drew the back of his hand across his waiting lips, and smacked them in anticipation of the unexpected good fortune that had befallen him. Rodolph asked Conrad to provide as well for their visitor as the remnants of the feast would allow, and the archer, wasting no time in further conversation, fell to, and left nothing for a later guest, should such an one arrive.

While the archer heroically made up for lost time, Conrad brought round the horses, and Rodolph assisted the Countess to mount. Hilda and Conrad were also ready for the short journey that lay before them, but the Emperor stood with bridle rein over his arm, and waited the finishing of the feast, desiring to give the archer hint that there was probably action ahead at Thuron Castle.

“You have met with little encouragement, then, on your march down the river,” said the Emperor, as the bowman, with a deep sigh, ceased operations.

“No encouragement at all, your Lordship. Never in all my travelling, either in Germany or elsewhere, have I passed through a country so depressingly peaceful, which weighs heavily on one’s spirits; indeed

it is enough to make a man turn monk, and forsake the bow-string for a string of beads. What better evidence could there be of the sluggish nature of this district than the fact that there is at this moment approaching us, doubtless from yonder castle, three mounted and armed men, who in some sort appear to be trying to come upon us unmarked, yet here we are, a tranquil group, paying scant attention to their adjacency."

As the archer, who was gazing toward Thuron Castle, spoke thus in a tone of complacent dejection, Rodolph, who had been scanning the district to the west, turned suddenly round, and to his amazement beheld three men on horseback, who had evidently worked their way unseen up the opposite side of the hill from which the Emperor and his party had ascended, and who now stood some distance off, regarding the startled quartette and their calm guest; the Bowman not having the remotest idea what the sudden appearance of those to whom he had thus casually called attention meant to his hosts.

To Rodolph they were merely three armed men, but the keener eyesight of the Countess brought swift knowledge to her, and caused a quick pallor to overspread her face.

"The Count Bertrich!" she cried.

The Emperor clenched his fist and drew a deep breath, as the thought of all his useless scouring of the western horizon surged over him.

"Intercepted!" he muttered to himself, with a half-smothered oath.

CHAPTER XI.

IN QUEST OF A WIFE WITH A TROOP OF HORSE.

WHEN Count Bertrich flung himself from his horse in front of the Archbishop's summer palace at Zurlauben, and strode hastily up the steps that led to the entrance, he passed through the crowded hall, looking neither to the right nor the left until he reached the ante-chamber that communicated with the large room in which the Elector transacted his business. The waiting and excited throng in the hall made way for him, as the great war-lord and acknowledged favourite of the powerful Archbishop went clanking through among them clad in full armour, paying not the slightest heed to their salutations.

The Count found the secretary ready to conduct him instantly into the presence of the Archbishop, and together, in silence, they entered the lofty apartment that was part chapel and part throne-room.

At the further end of the noble presence-chamber Arnold von Isenberg paced back and forward across the polished floor, his hands clasped behind him, a dark frown on his downward bent brow. He was clad in the long silken robes of his priestly office, and their folds hissed behind him like a following litter of serpents as he walked. He paused in his promenade when the Count and the monk entered, and, straightening his tall form, stood regarding them in silence, until the secretary slipped noiselessly from the room and left the summoned and summoner alone together.

"You are here at last," began the Archbishop, coldly. "It is full time you arrived. Your bride has fled."

“Fled? The Countess Tekla?”

“You have no other, I trust,” continued the Prince of the Church, in even, unimpassioned tones. “My first thought on learning she was missing made me apprehensive that the girl had anticipated the marriage ceremony by flying to your notoriously open arms, and I expected to be asked to bless a bridal somewhat hastily encompassed; but I assume from your evident surprise that she has been given the strength to resist temptation which takes the form of your mature and manly virtues.”

The sword cut across Count Bertrich's face reddened angrily as he listened to the sneering, contemptuous words of the Archbishop, but he kept his hot temper well in hand and said nothing. The manner of his over-lord changed, and he spoke sharply and decisively, as one whose commands admit neither question nor discussion.

“Last night the Countess Tekla took it upon herself to disappear. The guards say she passed them going outward about ten o'clock, and no one saw her return. This leads me to suspect that, with childish craftiness, the passing of the guards was merely a ruse on her part, intended to mislead, and so although I pay little attention to such a transparent wile, I have taken all precautions and have already acted on the clue thus placed in my hands, for there is every chance that the girl is indeed a fool; we usually err in ascribing too much wisdom to our fellow creatures. Regarding the proposed marriage, which, strange and unaccountable as it may appear to me, and must appear to you, the Countess seemed to view with little favour, she threatened to appeal to the Emperor and also to his Holiness the Pope.” On mentioning the name of the latter, the Archbishop slightly inclined his head. “I take small account of the Emperor, but have nevertheless sent a body of fleet troopers along the Frankfort road in case she meant what she said, which I suppose may sometimes happen with a wo-

man. They know not whom they seek, but have orders to arrest and bring back every woman they find, therefore we are like to have shortly in Treves a screaming bevy of females, enough to set any city mad. I have thrown out a drag-net, and we shall have some queer fish when it is pulled in. But to you and to you alone, Count Bertrich, do I reveal my mind; see therefore that you make no mistake. The fool has taken to the water and is now committed to the sinuous Moselle.

“She said nothing in her protests about her uncle of Thuron, and unless I am grievously misled, the crooked talons of the black vulture are in this business. He has doubtless provided boat and crew, and they are making their way down the river in the night, concealing themselves during the day. They will avoid Bruttig and Cochem. Make you therefore for Bruttig with what speed you may, sparing neither horse nor man; yourself I know you will not spare. If nothing has been heard of them there, order a chain across the river that will stop all traffic and set a night guard upon it; then press on to Thuron across the country by the most direct line you can follow, coming back up the river to intercept them, for their outlook will be entirely directed toward what is following them. If, in spite of all our precautions, the girl reaches Thuron, seek instant entrance to the castle and audience with the Black Count. Demand in my name, immediate custody of the body of Countess Tekla; if this is refused, declare castle and lands forfeit and Heinrich outlaw. Retire at once to Cochem, where I shall join you with my army. And now to horse and away. Success here depends largely on speed.”

Count Bertrich made no reply but sank on one knee, rose quickly and left the room. The expression on his face as he passed through the multitude in the great hall was not such as to invite inquiry, and no one accosted him.

"There is war in that red scar of Bertrich's," said an officer to another.

Outside the Count flung himself on his horse, gave a brief word of command to his waiting troop, and galloped away at the head of his men.

He made no attempt to pursue the extremely crooked course of the upper river, but, knowing the country well, he left the Moselle some distance below Treves, and, taking a rude thoroughfare that was more path than road, followed it up hill and down dale through the forest. He was determined to reach Bruttig that night, hoping to finish the journey by moonlight, taking advantage of the long summer day and riding as hard as horseflesh could endure. When the day wore on to evening Bertrich saw that he had set to himself no easy task, for in the now pathless forest, speedy progress became more and more difficult, and when the moon rose, the density of the growth overhead allowed her light to be of little avail. Several times a halt was sounded and the bugle called the troop together, for now all attempt at regularity of march had been abandoned, but on each occasion the numbers thus gathered were fewer than when the former rally was held. In spite of his temporary loss of men, Bertrich, with stubborn persistence, determined to push on, even if he reached Bruttig alone. For an hour they pressed northward to find the river which they now needed as a guide, knowing they would come upon it at Bruttig or at least some short distance above or below it, but before the Moselle was reached they suddenly met an unexpected check. The outposts of an unseen band commanded them to stop and give account of themselves."

"Who dares to bar the way of the Archbishop's troops?" demanded Count Bertrich.

"It is the Archbishop's troops that we are here to stop. Will you fight or halt?" was the answer.

Bertrich, with his exhausted men and jaded horses,

was in no condition to fight, yet was he most anxious to pursue his way, and get some information of his whereabouts, so he spoke with less imperiousness than his impulse at first prompted.

"I am Count Bertrich, commanding a division of his Lordship's army. I am on a peaceful mission, and, when I left his Lordship this morning, he had no quarrel with any. There has been some misunderstanding, and I should be loath to add to it by drawing sword unless I am attacked."

"You shall not be molested if you stay where you are. If, however, you attempt to advance, our orders are to fall upon you," said a voice from the darkness.

Noticing that the voice which now spoke was not the one that had first challenged, Count Bertrich said,

"Are you in command, or am I speaking to a sentinel?"

"I am in command."

"Then who are you and whom do you serve?"

"Doubtless you are well aware whom I serve?"

"I know no more than the Archbishop himself."

"That I can well believe, and still would not hold you ignorant."

"We are talking at cross purposes, fellow. There must be, as I have said, some mistake, for the domains of the Archbishop are in a state of peace. There is no secret about my destination as there is none about the name which I have rendered to you. I am bound for Bruttig and hope to reach there before day dawns."

"My master knew of your destination and that is why I am here to prevent you reaching it."

"What you allege is impossible. None knew of my destination save the Archbishop and myself, and I have ridden from Treves with such use of spur that news of my coming could not have forestalled me. Again I ask you whom you serve."

"That you doubtless guess, for you know whom you are sent against, and why you ride to Bruttig."

"You speak in riddles; what have you to fear from plain answers?"

"I fear nothing. My duty is not to answer questions but to arrest your progress toward Bruttig. If you have questions to ask, ask them of Count Beilstein."

"Oh ho! Then it is to Count Beilstein I owe this midnight discourtesy. I thank you for that much information, which is to me entirely unexpected. Where is the Count?"

"He is at Bruttig."

"How far is that from where we stand?"

"Something more than a league."

"I cannot comprehend why Count Beilstein should endeavour to prevent my reaching Bruttig, nor how he can be aware of an expedition of which neither the Archbishop nor myself knew aught this morning. In addition to this, Bruttig is under the joint jurisdiction of my master and yours and the Count of Winneburg, therefore the retainers of each over-lord have free entrance to the place."

"Such was indeed the case until the Archbishop broke the truce. Now Beilstein and Winneburg have combined, overthrown the Archbishop's jurisdiction, and they hold Bruttig together, with the men of the Elector prisoners."

"In the Fiend's name when did this take place? We knew nothing of it at Treves. How broke the Archbishop the truce?"

"It was broken by an emissary of his, who by magic sword-play slew my master's Captain, leaving in his neck a hole no bigger than a pin's point, yet enough to let out the life of my fellow soldier. Then when there was outcry at this foul play, the fellow, being sore pressed, cries 'Treves, Treves,' claiming that the wench with him was no other than the ward of the Archbishop——"

"Ha! Say you so? And what then?"

"Thereupon the Archbishop's Captain bugles up the men of Treves, rallies round the emissary of his crafty Lordship, and makes rescue, escorting him later, wench

and all, to his Lordship's stronghold of Cochem, where doubtless they think themselves safe. But Beilstein, issuing from his castle, went forthwith to Bruttig, joined with Winneburg, made prisoners of the men of Treves, and sent me here in force to intercept any whom they expected the Archbishop would shortly send, as indeed he seems to have done under your distinguished leadership."

"You fill me with amazement. There is, as I surmised, a misunderstanding, and one of no small moment, which we must make it our business to set right. It is therefore most important that I should have speech with your master and that speedily. I pray you instantly to escort me with your men to Bruttig."

"That may I not do, my Lord. My orders are strict and Count Beilstein is not the man to overlook divergence from them."

"Then come with me yourself; I shall go as your prisoner or in any guise you please, so that no time be lost. My men will camp here for the night."

"I cannot part company from my orders, which are to stop you or to fight with you if you refuse to stand."

"But the man you call emissary of the Archbishop, who killed your comrade, is the one I travel in hot haste to arrest. Him the Archbishop will gladly yield to your master for fitting punishment, but while we babble here, time flies and he with it."

"It will take more than the bare word of any follower of Treves to make my master believe that the murderer, who went jauntily with escort of the Archbishop's men to the Archbishop's castle in Cochem, is one whom the Archbishop is desirous of handing over to my Lord for punishment, still this much I may do. I will send at once a fleet messenger to my Lord at Bruttig, acquainting him with your presence here, and that messenger will take any word you are pleased to send to Count Beilstein."

Count Bertrich sighed as he agreed to this, for he

was too strict a disciplinarian himself not to know that the Captain who offered to do this much, dare not wander from the definite instructions he had received. He had at first some thought of beseeching Beilstein to send instant word to Cochem to hold within the castle all who lodged there, until the arrival of commands from the Archbishop, but he was loath to divulge to Beilstein and Winneburg the full facts of the case, and he was well aware that, without doing so, he would have some difficulty in explaining his own presence, which seemed to tally so exactly with the forecasts of those now temporarily opposing him. However, a league was but a short distance and a swift messenger would speedily cover it. His men, thoroughly exhausted, were, many of them, asleep in their saddles, and although he himself was still eager to be on his way, he saw that any attempt to move onward would be futile and would still further complicate the already intricate condition of things, so he contented himself with sending a message to the Count, the purport of which was, that there had been a mistake which the Archbishop would speedily rectify, and that it was imperative for the capture of the criminal, that an immediate conference should take place between Count Beilstein and himself.

This done, he gave the order for dismounting and resting until the messenger returned. A camp was formed and picketed to prevent surprise, although he had little fear of an attack, as he had evidently convinced the opposing Captain of his good faith, yet the military instinct was strong in Count Bertrich, and he took all the precautions which suggest themselves to a man in an enemy's country. The moment he threw himself on the ground he fell into a sound and much needed sleep.

It was daylight when one of the sentinels awoke him, saying the messenger had returned. Count Beilstein gave Bertrich choice of three courses of action: first, he might come alone to Bruttig; second, he

might bring his men with him, provided they first deliver up their arms to the Captain who had stopped him; third, he might fight. Count Bertrich quickly decided. He ordered his followers to deliver up their arms to the Captain, he himself retaining his weapons, and thus they marched into Bruttig. It was soon made apparent to both the opposing nobles that the unknown young man who had proved himself so expert a swordsman was no minion of the Archbishop. The Archbishop's Captain had not yet returned from Cochem, so the only one who could give a connected account of what had taken place was Winneburg's Captain, who, under the shrewd cross-questioning of Count Bertrich, speedily proved that no document had passed between the young man and the Archbishop's leader; that, in fact, the Captain had several times asked for such, but it had not been produced.

"It is as I suspected," said Count Bertrich, "the person who held a passport from Frankfort is a follower of Black Heinrich, whose object is but too evident. He seeks to embroil you with the Archbishop, and has come perilously near to success. If the scoundrel is still at Cochem, into which castle I assure you he went with extreme reluctance, and only under pressure of circumstances, for you learn from your own man that he refused to send a messenger to Treves when the Captain offered to dispatch one, then we have him fast, and I undertake, on my own responsibility, to deliver him to the just vengeance of Count Beilstein. What I fear is, that this unfortunate delay has given him time to slip away from Cochem and betake himself to Thuron, where we may have to smoke him out, if Black Heinrich refuses to deliver him to us. As to this imprisoning of the Archbishop's men in the absence of their Captain, I think the least said about it the better. I shall certainly not dwell upon it when I return to Treves, but I would suggest that they be liberated without further delay. The Archbishop was not in the happiest temper when I

parted from him yesterday, and one can never predict with certainty what he may do under provocation. I have myself been so anxious to avoid any cause of offence, that I have gone to the extreme length of disarming my men and coming unprotected among you, an act for which his Lordship is little likely to commend me, should it come to his ears. The moment their weapons are restored, I shall journey to Cochem and endeavour to catch my young swordsman."

Winneburg, the quarrel being none of his, having slept on the matter, and seeing more clearly than he did on the previous day the danger of entangling himself with so formidable an antagonist as the Archbishop of Treves, at once admitted that there had been a misunderstanding all round, and expressed his willingness to revert to the former condition of things, as the Archbishop, through Count Bertrich, had disclaimed the doings of their visitor of the day before. Beilstein, more hot-headed and more stubborn, was reluctant to admit himself in the wrong, but if his ally fell from him, there was nothing for it but submission, with the best grace he could bring to bear on his retreat; and certainly Bertrich seemed in no way disposed to impose hard conditions, so he gave order that the prisoners should be released, and that their arms should be returned to Bertrich's men.

Having eaten, Count Bertrich and his troop hastened down the river, hoping to intercept the fugitives at Cochem. In sight of the castle he met the Captain and his dozen horsemen returning. He sent all back with the exception of one man, whom he forwarded to Treves to acquaint the Archbishop with what had taken place. The Captain was ordered to detain the Countess Tekla in Cochem Castle until the Archbishop's pleasure should be known; to arrest the young man who accompanied her, take him to Bruttig, and deliver him to Count Beilstein. Then taking but two followers with him, Count Bertrich struck across the

country direct for Thuron Castle. He approached that stronghold with caution, keeping to the high lands above the castle until he espied on the other side of the river the party of whom he was in search, and saw that they had indeed stolen away from Cochem. Coming down to the river edge, keeping all the while in concealment as much as the nature of the country permitted, knowing there was danger in crossing the stream in full view of Thuron Castle itself, but nevertheless not hesitating for a moment, he and his two men plunged their horses into the flood and won the other side a little below the promontory of Hattonis Porta. Stealthily ascending the hill, hoping to take the party by surprise, but in any case having not the slightest doubt of the result of the encounter, Count Bertrich found himself within range of the alert eyes of the English archer.

CHAPTER XII.

CUPID'S BOW GIVES PLACE TO THE ARCHER'S.

RODOLPH'S first thought ran toward the safety of the Countess. He resolved at once to send her down the hill they had so recently climbed, and, under escort of Conrad, ask her to cross on horseback to the other side of the river, reaching the castle as soon as might be, while he held Count Bertrich and the two men in check; but a moment's reflection convinced him that the Count, having intercepted them by cutting across country to the south of the Moselle, had most likely placed on the opposite bank a company of troops in ambush, ready to capture whoever came within its radius. The crossing must be done under shadow of the castle, so that any lurking enemy might be over-awed by the menace of its presence, and thus they could ascend unhindered to its frowning portal. That their situation was already attracting attention at Thuron was evident, for the Emperor saw bodies of men grouped upon the walls, while several horsemen were collected at the entrance as if in readiness to ride, should occasion demand their interference. But there was no signal by which Rodolph could call for aid, and, of course, Black Heinrich had little suspicion that his own niece was probably about to be captured almost within the shadow of his strong castle.

There was, however, scant time for pondering. Now that concealment was no longer possible, Count Bertrich, adjusting his lance for the encounter, was advancing, closely followed by the two men.

"Conrad," cried the Emperor, "take the Countess down the hill till you lose sight of our assailants, then,

as speedily as possible, bend through the forest to the north, circling this spot so that you come upon the Moselle opposite Thuron. Cross the river and make for the castle gates."

"But you, my Lord, unarmed, cannot oppose three armoured men," objected Conrad.

"I stand by his Lordship," said the archer, with an unruffled confidence, that in spite of the strait they were in brought the suggestion of a smile to the lips of the Emperor.

"We will hold our ground, with what success may befall us," replied Rodolph, "but lose no time in your circuit, and keep strict watch for ambush."

The Countess, Conrad, and Hilda departed, leaving Rodolph and the bowman alone on the top of the hill, in serious jeopardy, for neither man wore armour, and the Emperor had no weapon except his slight rapier.

The archer, seeing from the first that trouble was ahead, but having too little curiosity regarding its origin to cause him to venture inquiry, so long as no attempt was made to smooth away difficulty and bring about a peaceful understanding, caring not a jot whether the side of the quarrel he expected to champion was just, or the reverse, had unslung his bow, giving a hitch to the full quiver so that the ends of the arrows were convenient to his right hand, and now stood with left foot slightly forward as a bowman should, measuring critically with his half shut eye the distance between himself and the three horsemen.

"Is it your Lordship's pleasure," he asked, "that I kill all three, or do you purpose to try conclusion yourself with one or other of them? If so, which shall I spare?"

"These men are cased in iron, and proof against your shafts. I will parley with them and offer single combat to their leader; we cannot hope to prosper in a general onset."

"Their faces are bare, which is all the kindness I ask of any man who sets himself up as target."

"If choice is to be made, spare the leader, and leave him for me to deal with," said Rodolph, stepping forward and raising his voice, as he accosted the hostile party.

"My Lord, Count Bertrich," he cried, "I ask of you a truce and a parley, when we may each disclose our intentions to the other, and find if amicable adjustment be possible."

An exclamation of intense disgust escaped the impatient archer at this pacific proclamation, but his drooping spirits revived on hearing the defiant tone of the Count.

"Who are you, whelp, to propose a conference with me? Were it not that I promised to take you alive so Beilstein may have the pleasure of hanging you, I would now ride you down and put a good end upon mischievous interference. Therefore surrender, and appeal for clemency to Beilstein, for you will have none from me."

"Spoken like a brave man and a warrior," exclaimed the archer, with enthusiasm. "Would there were more nobles in Germany resembling him. Now, my Lord, surely the insult anent your hanging, demands that instant defiance be hurled at him."

"Peace, peace," whispered Rodolph, "you will have your fighting, never fear. I must gain time so that the others may escape." Then he cried aloud, "If I surrender, my Lord Count, it must be on terms distinctly set forth, with conditions stated and guaranteed by your knightly word."

The Emperor's diplomatic efforts were without avail. Count Bertrich made no reply, but giving a quick word of command to his followers, levelled lance and dug spurs into his horse. The three came on together, the Count slightly in advance, his men at right and left of him, the pulsation of the beating hoofs on the hard turf breaking the intense stillness. The Emperor stood firm with tightened lips awaiting the onslaught, having little hope that it would end favour-

ably to him. The archer, however, gave forth a joyous cry that was half-cheer, half-chuckle, and, without awaiting for command, drew swiftly the string of his bow to his ear, letting fly twice in succession with a twang that sounded like a note from a harp. The arrows, with the hum of angry bees, passed first by one ear and then by the other of the advancing warrior, who instinctively swayed his head this way and that to avoid the light-winged missiles, thinking he was shot at and missed, but the piercing death-shriek first from the man at his left and then from the one at his right, speedily acquainted him with the true result. Before him he saw the deadly weapon again raised, and felt intuitively that this time the shaft was directed against himself, although the archer paused in the launching of it, apparently awaiting orders from his superior. The Emperor raised his right hand menacingly and cried in a voice that might almost have been heard at the castle:

“Back, my Lord Count. There is certain death to meet you in two horse-lengths more.”

The impetus of the Count's steed was so great that it was impossible to check it in time, but he at once raised his lance in token that he had abandoned attack, and, pulling on the left bridle rein, swerved his course so that he described a semi-circle and came to a stand facing his foes, with the two dead men lying stark between him and his intended victims.

With a downward sweep of the hand that had been lifted, the Emperor signalled to his ally to lower his bow, which the archer reluctantly did, drawing a deep sigh that the battle should be so quickly done with.

Rodolph advanced a few steps and once more accosted his foe.

“My Lord,” he said, “you see, I trust, that I hold your life at my mercy. I am willing to give terms to a brave antagonist, which he refused to me.”

“In truth,” grumbled the archer, “I see nothing

brave in one who attacks with three, all heavily armoured and mounted, two on foot, one of whom is without weapons. I beg you to tell him so, or allow me to speak my mind to him, for he is a proud man and I doubt not with proper goading, he may be urged to a fresh onset."

Rodolph paid no attention to the interruption, but continued:

"If you will give me your word that you will return to Cochem, you may pass unharmed, and we will not attempt to molest you further."

The Count, however, made no reply, but sat like a statue on his black horse, gazing on his fallen comrades and meditating on the changed situation. Then he groped in a receptacle that hung by his saddle and drew forth, not a new weapon, as the archer, peering at him, suspected, but a filmy web that glittered like an array of diamonds. This, removing his gauntlets, he clasped about his neck, fastening it to the lower part of his helmet, shaking the folds over his shoulders like a cape.

"Fine chain armour of Milan steel," murmured the archer, seemingly hovering between anxiety regarding the defensive qualities of the new accoutrement and delight at the thought that the Count was again about to venture himself against them. With a clank of iron on iron the warrior brought down his barred visor over his face, and, drawing on his gauntlets which during these preparations had rested on his saddle bow, grasped his lance and lowered it, presenting now no pregnable point of his person to the flying arrow.

"By Saint George," cried the archer, "I would fain take service with that man. He displays a persistence in combat which warms my heart towards him."

But the softness of the archer's heart did not cause him to take any precaution the less, for he drew out a sheaf of arrows, selecting carefully three that seemed to be thinner at the point than the others. Two of

these he placed in his mouth, letting their feathered ends stick out far to his left, so that his bow arm was free from their interference; the third he notched, with some minuteness, on the string.

"My Lord, I must shoot now," he mumbled with his encumbered mouth, looking anxiously at Rodolph, who in turn was viewing no less anxiously the silent preparations of Bertrich. The Count, however, was in little hurry to begin, apparently wishing to satisfy himself that he had neglected no expedient necessary for his own safety.

"There is no help for it," said the Emperor. "Do your best, and Heaven speed the shaft."

The bowman twanged the string, bending forward eagerly to watch the fate of his arrow. The shaft sang an ever lowering song, as it flew, falling fairly against the bars of the visor with an impact that rang back to them, palpably penetrating an interstice of the helmet, for it hung there in plain sight. The Count angrily shook his head, like an impatient horse tormented by the bite of a fly, but he sat steady, which showed the archer there was an arrow wasted. The toss of his head did not dislodge the missile, and the Count, with a sweep of his gauntlet, broke it away and cast it contemptuously from him.

"Alas!" groaned the archer, fitting the second to the string, "it was the thinnest bolt I had."

Count Bertrich waited not for the second, but came eagerly to meet it, bending down as a man does who faces a storm—levelling lance and striking spur. The horse gallantly responded. The second arrow struck the helmet and fell shivered, the third was aimed at the chain armour on the neck, and striking it, glanced into the wood, disappearing among the thick foliage. Still Bertrich came on unchecked, raising his head now to see through the apertures of his visor to the transfixing of the archer, who, well knowing there was but scant time for further experiment, hastily plucked a fourth arrow from his quiver, and, without taking

aim, launched it with a wail of grief at the charger, driving the arrow up to its very wing in the horse's neck just above the steel breastplate. The horse, with a roar of terror, fell forward on its knees, its rider's lance thrusting point into the earth some distance ahead, whereupon Bertrich, like an acrobat vaulting on a pole, described an arc in the air and fell, with jangling clash of armour, at the feet of the Emperor, relaxing his limbs and lying there with a smothered moan.

The archer paid no attention to the fallen noble, but running forward to the horse began to bewail the necessity that had encompassed its destruction. He however thriftily pulled the arrow from its stiffening neck, wiped it on the grass, and spoke, as if to the dead horse, of the celerity of its end, and the generally satisfactory nature of bow-shot wounds, wishing that the animal might have had a realisation of its escape from being mauled to its death by clumsy Germans.

Rodolph stooped over his foe to throw back on its hinges his visor, whose opening revealed the unconscious face of the Count.

"It seems inhuman to leave him thus," he said, "but there is a woman's safety in question, and I fear he must take the chance he drove down upon."

"He can make no complaint of that," replied the archer, "and is like to come speedily to his contentious self again, if I may judge by the flutter of his eyelids. Indeed, I grieve not for his bruises, but for the hurt his obstinacy forced me to inflict upon his poor horse, a noble animal which I never would have slain did not necessity compel."

"Capture a horse belonging to one of the fallen men, and accompany me down the hill," said Rodolph, briefly.

The archer first recovered the two arrows that had overthrown his unknown opponents, bestowing on their bodies none of the sympathy he had lavished on the horse, for, as he muttered to himself, it was their

trade, and a well-met shaft should occasion them little surprise, which undoubtedly was the fact.

Having, with some difficulty, secured one of the horses, and with still more trouble succeeded in seating himself in the saddle—for, as he said, he was more accustomed to the broad of his foot than the back of a horse—he followed his leader, who, with grave anxiety, was scanning the river bank opposite Alken, hoping to see some indication of the Countess emerging from the forest.

“Archer,” said Rodolph, turning to his follower, “your great skill, and no less indomitable courage, has to-day saved my life, and has placed me otherwise under more obligation to you than you can easily estimate. I hope yet to make good my debt, but in the meantime I may cheer your heart by telling you that your expert bowmanship has made inevitable what was before extremely probable, which is, that these valleys will shortly ring with war, and the Lord only knows when the conflict shall cease—possibly not until yonder castle is destroyed, or the Archbishop returns defeated to Treves.”

“Say you so, my Lord? Then indeed is virtue rewarded, as I have always been taught, though seeing little confirmation of it in my wandering over this earth. I winged my shafts for the pure pleasure of seeing them speed, not forgetting my duty to you in the earning of my threepence a day, duly advanced into my palm before service was asked, the which, I know to my grief, is not customary among nobles, although fair encouragement in spoils gives compensation for backwardness in pay; still I had no hope for such outcome as war, when I drew string to ear, and am the more encouraged to think that a wholesome act, thus unselfishly accomplished, brings fitting recompense so trippingly on its trail. You spoke of the Archbishop (God bless his Lordship), do I fight, think you, for, or against him?”

“As the man you have so recently overturned is the

friend, favourite, and in general the right hand of the Archbishop, judge you in which camp your neck is hereafter the safer."

"I have long desired to fight for the Church, but, for a devout man, it seems ever my fate to be on the opposite side. Ah well, it matters little, and it serves the Archbishop right for the inhospitality of his gate at Treves, where they know not a useful soldier when they see one. We are like to be beleaguered in yon castle then?"

"Very like, indeed."

"Know you aught of how they are provisioned for a siege?"

"That will be among the first things I shall inquire when I enter."

"It is a most important particular, and in the inquiry it might not be a waste of breath to give some hint regarding the plenishing of the wine vaults."

"I understand Black Heinrich has a secret passage to the river, so we are not likely to suffer from thirst."

"'Tis a sensible precaution; I would not say a word against water, which I have often found to be useful in the washing of wounds and otherwise, still when a man is expected to fight, I think there is nothing puts such heart in him as a drop of good sound wine, so it be not taken to excess, although the limit of its usefulness, in my own case, I have never yet had a sufficiency of the beverage to gauge."

"The Black Count, from what I hear of him, is not one to neglect the laying in of wine; it however may be well to question him closely regarding his cellarage before you take service with him, for I surmise that he who finds lodgment in the castle will not soon get abroad again, as the troops of the Archbishop will shortly encircle it closely."

"The prospect," said the archer, drawing the back of his hand across his mouth as if his lips were already moist with good vintage, "is so alluring that I can scarce credit it, and fear the Archbishop may give or

accept apology, for we seem to be in a region where compromise is held in high esteem, and his Lordship has already acquired the reputation of being a cautious man (may I be forgiven if I do him an injustice); still, if the Count who plunged so bravely against us, hath [the ear of him, he may whisper some courage into it, for he acquitted himself on the hilltop as a man should. I must confess that I should dearly cherish the privilege of being beleaguered in a strong castle, for it hath ever been my fortune to fight hitherto in the field, directing my shafts against various strongholds, and living with scant protection while launching them, sleeping where I might, in a ditch or in a tent, as the gods willed, and ever like to have my slumbers broken by stampede or sortie when least expecting it. I was never one who yearned for luxury, but it must be a delight to rest under continual cover, with a well-stocked cellar underneath, and the protection of a stout stone parapet while taking deliberate aim, not to mention the advantage that accrues to an archer who lets fly at one below him, rather than continually craning his neck to send his arrow among the clouds, the which gives little chance for accurate marksmanship. On one of yonder towers a man might well aspire to the delight of loosing string at the great Archbishop himself, and may such luck attend me, although I am the least covetous of mortals.”

“Well, archer, we shall presently see what befalls, and I feel myself the safer that you did not take fee from the Archbishop when you applied at the gates of Treves.”

The archer looked gratefully at his leader for the compliment, and together they rode in silence to the waterside opposite Alken.

As yet there was nothing visible of Conrad's party, who had probably taken a longer circuit than the occasion demanded, but the Emperor saw the cavalry of the castle, which had watched the conflict motion-

less, now descend towards Alken, and he rightly considered this move in his favour, did more of Bertrich's men lie in ambush in the opposite forest. Rodolph hoped that the Black Count himself was at the head of his men, but at that distance could distinguish nothing.

As they drew near the spot Rodolph was gratified to perceive Conrad emerging from the forest, where he had asked his charge to remain until he had reconnoitred and proved that the way was clear. The horsemen from the castle had reached Alken, and now stood drawn up fronting the river, ready to assist at the landing of the new-comers, or prevent the same, as might prove to be convenient.

Rodolph shouted across, asking that a boat be sent over, for he saw several lying on the beach, but those on the other side made no movement to comply with his wishes; in fact, it was doubtful if they understood, for here the Moselle is wide, with water flowing slow and deep.

Conrad, at a word from his master, plunged his horse into the flood, entering below the spot where Heinrich had placed a chain across the river for the encouragement of traffic, and, when he had landed, a boat was shoved off in which the Countess and Hilda were ferried over, the others following on swimming horses.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE BLACK COUNT IS PERSUADED NOT TO HANG HIS EMPEROR.

THE Emperor, when his dripping charger climbed the incline before Alken, looked with concern toward the troop of horse drawn up facing the river, wondering whether or no Heinrich himself was there to greet them. The leader of this scant cavalry sat on his steed a horse-length in advance of his men, and was rather startlingly red than black. His hair and beard were fiery crimson in colour, while the face they framed was of a similar hue, scarcely less violent, although it deadened somewhat as it reached the nose, and painted that well developed and prominent organ a rich deep purple, giving evidence, Rodolph thought, of the potency of Heinrich's liquors. The man's eyes were shifty and suspicious, and, all in all, his face was as forbidding as one would care to see, bringing to life the conjecture which had more than once crossed the young man's mind, that in thus unceremoniously changing guardians the Countess had scarcely bettered herself. However, he still had hopes that this crafty-looking horseman was not the uncle, from whom he expected violence perhaps, but not treachery.

The Emperor advanced and saluted the red warrior, who remained motionless upon his horse, bestowing an inquiring but none too friendly glance upon the approaching stranger.

"I would have speech with Count Heinrich, of Thuron," said Rodolph.

"Then you must seek him in his castle," was the reply, which brought a sigh of relief to the lips of the Emperor.

"Whom have I the honour of addressing?" he asked.

"I am Steinmetz, Captain of Castle Thuron. Who are you?"

"My name is Rodolph, a Lord of Frankfort, and I desire convoy to the castle."

"That is as may be," answered the Captain, with lowering brow. "What is your business with my Lord the Count, and who is the lady that accompanies you?"

"My business I will relate to the Count himself. The lady is the Countess Tekla, niece of Count Heinrich and sometime ward of Archbishop Arnold von Isenberg of Treves. If you have further questions to ask, it may be well to put them to your master, for my patience is at an end, and I am unaccustomed to the cross-examination of my inferiors. There is a chance that Count Heinrich may thank you for this delay, and a chance that he may not; you know him better than I, so act as best pleases you under that knowledge."

The Captain gave a whistle of astonishment when the name and quality of the lady were mentioned, and instantly saluted with his sword the man whom a moment before he had treated with scant courtesy. The truculence disappeared from his manner, and he said, with some eagerness:

"I shall be pleased to act immediately as your convoy to the castle, my Lord."

"Nothing could be more satisfactory," replied Rodolph.

The Captain gave the word to his men, who formed in line, some before and some after the visitors, and thus the procession made way through the village and up the zig-zag path that led to the castle, a rugged slanting road rising higher and higher at each turn, and disclosing broader and broader views of the charming valley of the Moselle. The scene was peaceful in the extreme, and, but for the clatter of armed men, one might have imagined that no such

thing as conflict could exist in all that region. On the hilltop, beyond the river, Rodolph could see that Count Bertrich had come to himself, had captured the remaining horse, and was transferring the accoutrements of his own animal to the new mount.

While Rodolph was watching his late opponent with keen interest, wondering whether the Count would betake himself to Cochem, or persist in his quest and visit Thuron, Tekla spoke to him.

"My Lord," she said, "you have somewhat neglected me of late, and I am still in ignorance of what happened when you so unceremoniously turned me off the hilltop. I trust you are unhurt."

"Not only unhurt, but untouched, Countess, thanks, not to my own prowess, but to the marvellous skill of the English archer, who annihilated the foe like a necromancer with a touch of his wand."

"Is Count Bertrich slain then?" she asked, with a shudder.

"No. Yonder he stands gazing at us, seemingly in hesitation as to what he shall do next, but his two followers are dead, and the pride of Bertrich encountered a shattering fall before he consented to let us pass him. I have proven myself a blundering guide, otherwise he had never intercepted us; but defenders are ever at hand when your Ladyship needs them, and I trust we are about to find the chief of them within these walls."

"Now that we are at our journey's end, I am oppressed with fear. I am more afraid than I was in grim Cochem itself, for I like not the look of this Captain and his men."

"They might be more prepossessing, it is true, but we should not judge hastily by externals. The outside of Castle Thuron seems forbidding enough, but no doubt a warm welcome awaits you within. Count Heinrich has to hold his possessions with a strong hand, and so cannot be too nice in the selection of those who are to do his work. You will find him, I trust, a true nobleman and an indulgent relative."

"I hope so," said the girl, with a sigh, which seemed to indicate that she looked forward to the meeting with more apprehension than she had yet shown.

The Captain sounded a bugle that hung at his belt, and the gates of the castle were thrown open in response, allowing the cavalcade to enter a wide stone-paved courtyard. There was none in authority to meet them, which was not strange, as no news of their approach could possibly have yet reached the stronghold. The gates were instantly shut behind them, and the Captain, flinging himself from his horse, strode into the castle, doubtless to acquaint his chief with the important tidings he carried. Rodolph dismounted, assisted the Countess to dismount, and then all stood there with the horsemen surrounding them, more in the attitude of captives than of welcome guests.

The archer gazed about him with much nonchalance, at the defences of the place, and asked questions concerning them from some of the servitors and men-at-arms who stood silently by, regarding the newcomers with looks of distrust, answering nothing. Far from being nonplussed by the scant attention paid his queries, he strutted round in high good humour, as if the castle were his own, and audibly made comments which were sometimes far from complimentary.

"If this man, Heinrich the Black, has a head on his shoulders somewhat more intelligent than those of his men-at-arms, he might defend the place with reasonable success, providing he was amenable to advice regarding certain additions I consider necessary, for if the attacking party——"

"Do not cheapen your advice, archer, by tendering it unasked," said Rodolph, somewhat sternly, "and avoid comment until you have made the acquaintance of the Count."

"Indeed there is wisdom in that," replied the archer, unabashed, "and I would that his Lordship showed greater anxiety to receive us suitably, for then the sooner would come a taste of his hospi-

tality, the which I am already anxious to pass opinion on."

Further conversation was prevented by the return of the Captain, who curtly informed Rodolph that Count Heinrich commanded the whole party to be brought before him, adding with a malicious leer that he had not found his Lordship so anxious for the meeting as the words spoken by the river bank had led him to suppose.

"You will remain in your saddles until further orders," said the Captain to his men, a behest that did little to reassure the Emperor.

The Countess spoke no word, although her pale face showed that this reception was scarcely to her liking. They all followed the Captain, who led them along a hall, up a broad stair, and through a doorway into a large and lofty room, where half-a-dozen men sat at a table with drinking flagons before them, while one strode angrily back and forward across the floor; his place at the head of the table was empty thus indicating that he was the Count, although Rodolph needed no such token to aid recognition.

Count Heinrich was more than six feet high, and strongly built. His massive head was covered with a shock of jet black hair; his beard and fierce moustache were of the same sombre colour, while his face was so swarthy that at first sight one doubted if the man had a drop of Saxon blood in him. He seemed more like the king of some heathen African domain, than a nobleman in a Christian land. His piercing eyes lit up his dark face, and a glance from them reminded Rodolph of a flash of lightning athwart a black cloud. He stopped abruptly in his march as those summoned into his presence entered, and roared rather than spoke:

"Well, madame, what do you here in Thuron?"

The Countess had taken a step or two in advance of her comrades, but paused dumbfounded at the thunder in his tone and the savagery of the face turned upon her.

"My Lord—uncle," she faltered at last, "I am here to implore your protection."

"Protection?" shouted Heinrich. "Is not the Lion of Treves able to protect you? It is *his* duty, not mine. Why does he send you journeying with such a scurvy escort?"

"My Lord, if you will permit me to address you in private I will inform you why——"

"You will inform me here. Have you, as I suspect, left Treves without sanction of the Archbishop?"

"Yes, my Lord."

"Of all reckless fools a woman— Are your horsemen still in saddle?" he cried, abruptly, to Captain Steinmetz.

"They are, my Lord."

"Well, madame, we shall repair the mischief you have done as speedily as horseflesh may. You shall have escort to do you honour, but must make your peace with the Archbishop as best you can. Take her to Cochem, and there present her to the Archbishop, or, in his absence, to the officer in charge."

"Oh, uncle, uncle," cried the girl, throwing herself at his feet, "you cannot commit such a crime. Remember, I am the daughter of your only sister. The Archbishop commands me to marry the Count Bertrich——"

"And a most proper union. It is his right to marry you to whomsoever pleases him. You cannot gainsay that. Am I to engage in war with Treves merely because you do not fancy Count Bertrich? It is enough that one of my line is a fool. I am none such."

"If you will not shelter me, let me, I beseech you, pass on to Frankfort to beg protection from the Emperor. Although you have the right to refuse hospitality you have no right to take me prisoner and send me back to Cochem."

"That shows you to be doubly a fool. The Emperor has gone to the Holy Land, where God protect him, and were he at Frankfort he would send you

back to Treves, for he must uphold the Feudal law. The Archbishop's will elected him, and if his will is to be void regarding a fire-brand like you, it would also be void regarding the Emperor's own elevation. As for my right to prison you, I have what rights I take, which even the Archbishop will hesitate to question."

"My Lord, touching the Emperor," began Rodolph, stepping forward, then checking himself, hardly knowing how to continue.

"Yes? Touching the Emperor? Are you empowered to speak for him? Who are you, sir, and what is your share in this business?"

Black Heinrich had calmed perceptibly as the colloquy between him and his niece went on, but the interpolation of Rodolph at once roused him to fury again, and caused him to turn on the young man with blazing eyes.

"I am a namesake of the Emperor, Lord Rodolph of Frankfurt, and I am further his most intimate friend."

"Are you so? Then I am glad to hear it. You will thus make all the more acceptable a sacrifice to Arnold von Isenberg, who likes interference as little as do I, whether from Emperor or serf. Captain Steinmetz, get hither your hangman, reeve a rope through a ring on the river front of the castle, and hang me this fellow so that the Archbishop's emissaries will see him dangling as they come up to inquire respecting this enterprise."

"My Lord, I would like a word with you in private before you proceed to this extremity."

"I transact my business publicly, that all the world may see."

"The more fool you," returned Rodolph, stoutly. "You have already bandied the epithet, therefore I use it. The Archbishop, who is no such ranter, but who acts while you sleep, has had secret spies here to note your weakness. His army is doubtless now on its way to Thuron. If you send back your niece he will think you to be a coward; he already holds you to be

a liar, and will believe nothing you say anent this affair, though you hang your whole garrison outside the walls. While you stand babbling there, gloriously frightening women and threatening defenceless men, he, like a sane warrior, is surrounding you. What the Archbishop thinks of your innocence in this matter is shown by the fact that Count Bertrich was sent directly to Thuron, and met us almost at your gates. Blood has already been shed, and two of the Archbishop's men lie dead within sight of your towers. Judge, then, of your childish paltry scheme of returning the Countess Tekla to Cochem. He knows you to be a knave, and will think you poltroon as well, and is doubtless right in both estimates."

Something almost resembling a ruddy colour came into the atramentous face of Black Heinrich as he listened to this rating of himself in his own hall. His jaws came together with a snap, and as the tirade went on, his bearded lips parted and showed his teeth like a white line across his face, giving him an expression that might well be called diabolical. His eyes nearly closed, and his breath came and went with a hissing sound. He stood rigid and motionless, while on the faces of all present was mute amazement at this temerity on the part of one virtually a prisoner. When Heinrich spoke, however, his former loudness was gone, and his words came quiet and measured.

"You are not wanting in courage, therefore will I countermand the order for your hanging, and cause your head to be struck off instead."

"Oh, uncle, uncle!" cried the horrified girl. "Do as you will with me, but he is guiltless even of previous knowledge regarding my escape from Treves. It is his misfortune, not his fault, that he is here. I implore you——"

"Steinmetz, let two of your men conduct this fellow to the courtyard, and there behead him."

The captain was about to move when a new voice from the corner of the apartment broke in upon the discussion.

"May I ask your Blackness," said the archer, "to turn your mind from the seeming peril of my Lord, to the much more certain jeopardy which confronts yourself, and charge the heathen who obeys you to make no motion, otherwise shall you instantly die. Without boasting, Henry Schwart, I beg to acquaint you with the fact that not all your men nor the surrounding of your strong castle can save your life if this string but slip my finger. I have killed two better men than you to-day when they were charging upon me at full speed, and well protected with armour; judge then what chance you have, standing there a rank temptation to an honest archer. My sure arrow cares not a jot whether it pierces the heart of a Count Palatine, or the honest if stupid brain of a serf. And now, my Lord Rodolph, the life of his Blackness rests upon your lips. If you say 'Let fly' I kill him and whoever stands behind him, for I will break bow if this shaft go not through at least three unarmoured men."

"It is as the archer says, my Lord," said Rodolph, "and his expertness with his weapon is something almost beyond belief, as your own men, watching from your walls a while since, will doubtless testify. I beg that you make equitable terms with us, for I assure your Lordship the archer is more to be feared at this moment than a round dozen of Archbishops. I ask you to pass your knightly word, and to swear by the three Kings of Cologne and the Holy Coat of Treves, that you will do us no hurt, but allow us to pass freely on to Frankfort."

The Black Count glared in speechless rage at the unwavering archer, and made no reply, but one of the men seated behind him shifted position gingerly, speaking as he did so.

"It is no shame to yield, my Lord," he said. "I was witness to the bowman's skill and saw the two men unaccountably fall with less difference in time between them than the drawing of a breath."

The Count spoke after a moment's silence.

"If I respect not my own word, the swearing on Kings of Cologne or Coat of Treves will not make me keep it."

"I will take your word, my Lord, so that it includes us all, especially the archer, and stands also for the good conduct of your men."

"My men will not lay finger on you with safe conduct from me. I give you, then, my word that you pass on unscathed to Frankfort. Does that suffice?"

"It does, my Lord. Archer, unbend your bow."

The archer, with a sigh, lowered his weapon, but apparently had no such trust as Rodolph, for he still kept the arrow on the string. Captain Steinmetz looked shrewdly at his master, as if inquiring "Does this hold?" but he met only a lowering frown and a sharp command to betake himself to the courtyard and disband his men.

A bugle at that instant sounded outside, and the captain presently returned to announce that Count Bertrich was without, and demanded instant audience in the name of the Archbishop of Treves.

"Demands, does he? Let him wait until I am ready to receive him," replied the swarthy Count. Then, turning to a servitor, he commanded him to ask the attendance of his lady.

Heinrich continued his pacing of the room, which he had abandoned when the Emperor and those with him had entered. Moodiness sat on his brow, and he spoke to none; all within the apartment maintained silence. Presently there entered, dressed in deep black, a thin, sallow lady of dejected appearance, who probably had none too easy or pleasant a life of it with her masterful husband.

Heinrich stood, and without greeting said:

"This is my niece, Tekla of Treves, now on her way to Frankfort. She will rest here to-night, so I place her in your care."

When the ladies had departed the Count ordered that Conrad and the archer should have refreshment, then turning to Rodolph, he said:

"As the visit of Count Bertrich may have connection with the escapade in the development of which you have no doubt ably assisted, I request you to remain here until the conference is ended, as your testimony concerning it may be called for."

Rodolph bowed without speaking.

"Admit Count Bertrich," directed the master of Thuron, standing with his great knuckles resting on the table, ready to receive his warlike visitor.

Bertrich strode into the room quite evidently fuming because of the waiting he had been compelled to undergo. He made no salutation, but spoke in a loud voice, plunging directly into his subject. His face was pale, but otherwise he showed no sign of the rough treatment he had encountered. Looking neither to the right nor to the left, but straight at the Black Count, he began:

"Heinrich of Thuron, I bear the commands of my master and yours, Arnold von Isenberg, Lord Archbishop of Treves. In his name I charge you to repair instantly to Treves, bearing with you my Lord's ward, the Countess Tekla, whom you have treacherously encouraged and assisted in setting at defiance the just will of his Lordship. You are also to bring with you as prisoners those who aided her flight, and deliver them to the garrison at Cochem."

The eyes of Count Heinrich gleamed ominously under the murky brow.

"I have heard," he said, harshly. "Is there anything further I can do to pleasure his Lordship?"

"You are to make public apology to him in his Palace at Treves, delivering into his hands the keys of Castle Thuron, and, after penance and submission have been duly performed and rendered, his Lordship may, in his clemency, entrust you again with the keeping of the castle."

"Does the category end so lamely?"

"I await your answer to as much as I have already cited."

"The Countess Tekla is of my blood, but some-

what contaminated, I admit, by the fact that her father was your predecessor in the Archbishop's favour. She was Arnold's ward, betrothed to you, his menial. She was in your hands at the capital city of the Archbishop, surrounded by spies and environed by troops. If then the girl has the wit to elude you all, baffle pursuit, and arrive unscathed in Thuron, she is even more my relative than I had given her credit for, and now the chief loser in the game comes yelping here to me like a whipped spaniel, crying 'Give her up.' God's wounds, why should I? She will but trick you again, and be elsewhere to seek."

"I demand your plain answer, yes or no, to be given at your peril!"

"There is no peril in dealing with so stupid a band as that at Treves, whose head a simple girl may cozen, and whose chief warrior, mounted and encased in iron, an unarmoured foot-soldier can overthrow. By the three Kings, you strut here in my hall with jingling spurs which you have no right to wear. You know the rules of chivalry; give up your horse, your armour and your sword to the archer who rightfully owns them, having won them in fair field. When thus you have purged yourself of dishonesty, I will lend you a horse to carry my answer back to Treves, which is as follows: Tell the Archbishop that the maiden is in my castle of Thuron. If he want her, let him come and take her."

The colour had returned in more than its usual volume to the pale face of Count Bertrich as he listened to this contemptuous speech, but he made no reply until he had withdrawn the gauntlet from his hand; then, flinging it at the feet of the Black Count, he cried:

"There lies the gauge of my Lord Archbishop of Treves, and when Thuron Castle is blazing, I shall beg of his Lordship to allow me to superintend the hanging of the pirate who now inhabits it."

Heinrich threw back his head with a rasping bark that stood him in place of a laugh.

"Indeed, my Lord, you have the true hangman's favour, and I marvel not the girl fled from you. I am, as you say, somewhat of a pirate, but with more honesty in me than passes current in Treves, so I cannot lift the gauge without leave of its real owner. Steinmetz, bring here the archer with his bow."

When the wonder-stricken archer appeared, grasping his weapon, his mouth full, for he had been reluctantly haled from a groaning board, he looked with some apprehension at the Black Count, expecting a recantation of the promise wrung from him.

"Archer," cried Heinrich, "there lies a gauntlet which is yours of right. I ask you for it."

"Indeed, my Lord," replied the archer, hastily gulping his food to make utterance possible, "if I have aught to say concerning it, it is yours with right good will."

"Then from where you stand, as I refused your formal proposal to judge your marksmanship, pin it for me to the floor."

The archer, nothing loath, drew bow, and with incredible swiftness shot one after another five shafts that pierced fingers and thumb of the glove, the first arrow still quivering while the last struck into its place.

For the only time that day the dark face of the Count Palatine lit up, in radiant admiration of the stout foreigner who stood with a smirk of self-satisfaction while he nodded familiarly to Captain Steinmetz as who would say:

"You see what would have happened if——"

Count Bertrich regarded him with wonder in his eyes, then pulling a purse from under his breast-plate, he said:

"Archer, I am in your debt for horse, armour and arms, and think it little shame to confess defeat to one so skilful. If you will accept this gold in payment, and leave me steed and accoutrements, I shall hold myself still your debtor. My excuse for tardy payment is that you did not wait to claim your own."

“My Lord,” said the archer, “I am always willing to compound in gold for any service I can render, and only hope to have another opportunity of practising against your closed helmet with arrows which I shall shortly make a trifle thinner in the shank than those I used to-day. I have to apologise to your Lordship that my shafts were rather too thick at the point to give complete satisfaction either to you or to me.”

All sign of levity vanished from Count Bertrich's face as he turned again to the Black Count.

“Although the exhibition we have been favoured with is interesting,” he said, “I do not understand what bearing it has upon the point we were discussing. Do you accept challenge, or shall I intercede with my Lord the Archbishop to grant you the terms formerly recited by me?”

“Tell the Archbishop that the glove has been pinned to my floor by five shafts, piercing the points of its five members; there it will remain until his Lordship contritely enters this hall on his knees and pulls them out with his teeth. When he does this and delivers up Count Bertrich to my hangman he shall have peace.”

Count Bertrich, again without salutation, turned his back upon the company, and left the apartment while the archer gazed with admiration on Black Heinrich, whose language had no mincing diplomacy about it, but stood stoutly for a quarrel.

CHAPTER XIV.

A RELUCTANT WELCOME.

AFTER Count Bertrich's unceremonious departure, Heinrich stood by the table with black brows, in the attitude of one who listened intently. No one in the room moved or spoke, and in the silence there came from the courtyard the noise of horse's hoofs on stone—first the irregular stamping of an animal struck or frightened by an impatient master, then the rythmical clatter of the canter, gradually diminishing until it lapsed beyond the hearing. The shutting of the gates with a clang seemed to arouse the master of Thuron. He drew a deep breath and glared about him fiercely, like a man ill-pleased, but determined.

"Steinmetz," he said, gruffly, "have you three men who can be trusted?"

"I should hope, my Lord, that we have many."

"Are you sure of three?"

"Yes, my Lord."

"Then send them with money—no, I will not tempt the dogs. Let one on horseback cross the river, and scour the region round Munster-Maifield, telling each peasant to bring to Thuron all the grain he has to sell. Announce that I will pay for wheat delivered here at once, a trifle higher than the market price."

"Indeed, my Lord," said Steinmetz, "it will not be believed; better trust your men with the money—if you really intend to pay."

"Tell the peasants that all who bring in grain to-morrow will be paid, and fair weight allowed. Say that I will in person visit those who do not respond, accompanied by a troop of horse, and take then

what pleases me without payment. See that no word slips out about the coming of the Archbishop. Another horseman is to go eastward and treat on our side of the river in the same way. Let the third ride up the Moselle and collect wine on similar terms. To-morrow it is bought ; next day it is taken."

"The sun is already set, my Lord. The men cannot go far to-night. Might it not be better——"

"Steinmetz, I spoke of hanging to-day, and I am still in the mood for it. If you do not listen silently and act promptly and accomplish effectually, you shall dangle. The three men you despatch must be in the saddle all night, returning here by sunrise, with a full account of what we may expect. They will be the surer of finding the peasants at home from now till cock-crow. If my vaults are not full to-morrow at this hour, some one's soul goes to Purgatory. Arrange as best pleases you, and account to me twenty-four hours hence. I shall myself superintend the intake, and will know how to deal with you if it is insufficient."

Steinmetz looked with evil eye at his imperious master, but left the room in silence and haste, to make the best of a dangerous commission.

Heinrich turned to Rodolph, and was about to address him when the archer, who had been uneasily awaiting a chance to attract attention, clearing his throat emphatically and often, with little result, spoke up.

"My Lord, I am pleased to see that you so thoroughly understand the first requisite of a good captain, the which is to attend properly to the victualling of his garrison, but I was somewhat hastily removed from a full board at which I had hardly seated myself, leaving in my hurry to wait on your highness, a full tankard of wine, which I would fain return to. Therefore, my Lord——"

"In the Fiend's name, do so!" cried Heinrich, who with wrinkled brow had at last comprehended his guest's volubility, whereupon the archer waited no

further permission but took himself off with a celerity which caused more than one smile to brighten the anxious faces in the room.

"You are doubtless as hungry as your man-at-arms," said Heinrich, turning to Rodolph, "but will possibly pardon the necessity that intervened between you and the board."

"Indeed, my Lord, I care little for food to-night, being more in need of rest, and, if I have your leave, would be glad to get sight of bed, especially as I hold it necessary to be early astir to-morrow, if we are to make Frankfort before nightfall."

"It is not my intention that you go to Frankfort; I have changed my mind. It will profit my niece nothing to go to Frankfort, for even if the Emperor were there, he is nothing but a hare-brained fool."

"I most emphatically agree with your estimate of him, my Lord."

"I thought you were a friend of his?"

"I am, and therefore know him well, and so with easy conscience can perform the part of candid friend and amply corroborate what you say concerning him."

"I know him not, and judge him but by hearsay. He is a foreigner and no true German, and was elected by the two Archbishops for their own purposes and cannot therefore be either a fighter or a man of brains. He lacks wisdom, think you?"

"He has no more wisdom, my Lord, than I, who mix with other people's quarrels and get scant thanks for my pains."

"A man can scarcely be expected to give thanks when he finds that others have arranged a war for him without his knowledge or sanction."

"That is very true, my Lord, and consequently I expect no thanks from the Archbishop, who thus finds his hand prematurely forced, and timely warning given to the redoubtable Count Heinrich. His secret preparations against you are thus unmasked, and I can well understand his rage thereat."

The Black Count scowled darkly at the younger

man, and seemed unable to measure accurately his apparent frankness, feeling the awkwardness of an unready man in the polished presence of a courtier, and resenting the feeling.

"That was not my meaning," he said, curtly.

"I am under little obligation to the Archbishop, and therefore tell you frankly that I believe it was his intention to attack you later, and catch you unawares. I was confirmed in this belief by some remarks dropped by the custodian of Cochem castle. He told me the Archbishop had lately sent two spies secretly, to find out all there was to learn regarding your defences. They did so, and reported to his pious and crafty Lordship."

"Did the custodian say Arnold intended an attack?"

"Had he said so, then would I have surmised you were free from danger. On the contrary, he said the Archbishop had thought better of it; but knowing the devious ways of the Elector, I am convinced he was making secret preparations for your downfall. He is not a man to wear his plans upon his robes of office. Imagine then his present rage at finding himself unaccountably forestalled, for nothing on earth will persuade him the flight of the Countess is not all your doing. He is taken unprepared. His troops are some days' hard marching from Thuron, and when they come, they find the land has already been scoured; that you have collected in your cellars all the meat and drink there is in the region round about, so therefore must he sustain his army from a distance and at increased labour and cost. Instead of secretly encircling your castle with an army, as if he called his troops by magic from the ground, and driving back your foragers on a half empty larder, he comes upon you well stocked and waiting for him. Instead of the haughty Bertrich giving you his ultimatum with a company at his back, and the white tents of Treves gleaming over the green landscape, the envoy goes back on the horse of one of his own slain men, himself

compelled to compound with an unknown foot-soldier for his forfeited accoutrements, and that in the hall of his enemy, under the taunts of the master of Thuron and the scornful gaze of his nobles. He returns to Treves an overthrown man with good assurance that Heinrich of Thuron cares not one trooper's oath for either the Archbishop or himself. Therefore, my Lord, you have right valid reason for thanking the Countess Tekla and myself, although I must own that some short time since, you gave but small token of your gratitude."

Heinrich regarded the young man as he spoke with a look of piercing intentness, tinctured with suspicion. As the recital went on and he began to see more clearly in what light his actions would go abroad, and how he stood in relation with the Archbishop, he drew himself proudly up, the smell of coming battle seeming to thrill his nostrils. Nevertheless there was rarely absent from his penetrating gaze the indication of slumbering distrust, with which a man uncouth and rough of tongue, usually listens to one of opposite qualities, for here before him was a puzzle; a man who apparently did not fear him, who spoke smoothly and even flatteringly, yet who, in a manner, looked down upon him as if he were inferior clay. He had this young man entirely in his power, yet the position might have been reversed for all the comfort it gave the Black Count.

"I am not sure but you have some qualities of a great commander," said Heinrich, a compliment which although perhaps reluctantly given, the nobleman recalled in after life as a proof of his own foresight, when Rodolph had become in the estimation of all Europe the most notable Emperor Germany had ever seen.

The young man laughed.

"I am scarcely in physical condition to do justice to whatever qualities I may possess, for these two nights past I have had more fatigue than sleep."

His entertainer, however, did not take the hint.

His brow was knitted in deep thought. At last he said, with a return to scepticism to his eyes:

"You spoke of being at Cochem. What did you there? Were you the guest of the Archbishop?"

"In a manner. A guest without his knowledge. The Countess and her party enjoyed the hospitality of Cochem last night."

"You amaze me. In your flight from Treves had you the actual temerity to make a hostel of the Archbishop's own palace?"

Again the Emperor laughed.

"It was not our intention to do so, but hospitality was forced upon us. At Bruttig I was, with some reluctance, compelled to slit the throat of Beilstein's captain in defence of the Countess, and, in the mêlée that followed, I had to proclaim the quality of the lady and demand protection from the Archbishop's troops there stationed. They conducted us to Cochem, and the Countess was received by the custodian of the castle there with a courtesy which seems to be entirely absent from such ceremonies further down the Moselle."

The Black Count grunted and the expression on his countenance was not pleasing to look upon. However, he did not pursue the subject, but called to an aged waiting servant and said:

"Conduct Lord Rodolph to the round guest-chamber."

"With your Lordship's permission," said Rodolph, "I would crave a word with the Countess Tekla. She has had recent trying experiences, and after the tension may come relapse. I would fain speak encouragingly to her, if you make no objection."

Heinrich threw back his lion head and laughed hoarsely.

"Objection of mine comes rather tardily. An unmarried woman who throws herself into the arms of the first chevalier who presents himself, and journeys with him night and day across the country, has no reputation left for me to protect. See her when you will for aught of me."

Rodolph reddened, and his lips came tightly together.

"My Lord," he said, slowly, "I have already informed you that I slit the throat of a man who spoke less slightly of her Ladyship than you have this moment done, and, from what I saw of him, he was as brave a warrior as you, and had the advantage of being surrounded by a larger following. Yet he lies buried in Bruttig."

"We have had this trick performed to-day already by the archer, and it is now stale. Push me not too often to the wall, for I am an impatient man, and some one is like to get hurt by it. I say nothing against the girl; she is my niece and if any one draw sword for her it should be me." Then to the aged servitor who still stood waiting, he cried:

"Take him to my lady's portion of the castle, and after, to the round guest-chamber."

Rodolph followed the servant, who shuffled on before him through various passages, and at last came to a small door where he knocked. It was opened by an old woman, who, after explanation, conducted the young man through several small rooms, in the first of which the manservant awaited the Emperor's return. This suite of rooms looked out on a courtyard overshadowed by one of the tall round towers of the castle, and in the courtyard there had been an attempt at gardening, unattended with marked success. The further room of the series was larger than any of the others, and was furnished less rudely than the huge apartment in which the Black Count and his men were gathered.

The fallow wife of Heinrich sat at a table near one of the windows and was gazing silently out on the courtyard. The Countess Tekla sat also by the table with her arms spread upon it and her head resting, face downward, upon them. Hilda had a bench to herself in a corner of the room, and it was evident that all three women had been weeping in a common misery. The Countess Heinrich gave Rodolph a

timid, almost inaudible greeting, and when Tekla raised her head at the slight sound, she sprang to her feet on seeing who had entered, undisguised joy in her wet eyes.

"Oh Lord Rodolph!" she cried, but could get no further.

The Emperor took her unresisting hand and raised it to his lips.

"I have come, my Lady Tekla," he said, with a smile, "to congratulate you on the successful accomplishment of your dangerous journey."

"Successful!" she cried. "Yes, successful as far as you could make it so, and most sincerely do I thank you. But cannot we leave for Frankfort to-night? I am now rested, and eager to be quit of this inhospitable dungeon. I would rather be in the forest with you——" then adding in some confusion, realising what she had said in her zeal to set off without delay, "and Conrad, and Hilda, than to stay longer in Thuron."

"In that you would do grave injustice to your valiant uncle, who but now has said he would be first to draw sword for your defence. No, Bertrich has returned empty-handed as he came, unless a bold defiance of the Archbishop from Heinrich of Thuron be considered, which he takes with him to Treves. The Emperor, as Heinrich truly says, is not at Frankfort, so a journey thence might be ill-timed. Your uncle freely extends to you the shelter and protection of Thuron. I must own to having formed an admiration for the man, although at first my feeling tended rather in the opposite direction. But it must not be forgotten on his behalf that our coming was unexpected, and he can scarcely be blamed if, like a spirited horse, he shied at first."

"He is a good man," said the Countess of Thuron, mildly, "if he be not crossed. He will brook no interference."

"Then we stay in Thuron!" cried Tekla, in amazement.

"It is your uncle's wish."

"And what of the Archbishop? Will he attack, think you?"

"Of that I have grave doubts. Arnold is above all things a cautious man, and if one were sure what any other would do, one might guess that the Archbishop would act the contrary. I think he will attack, but my thinking so quite prepares me for the opposite. In any case, Lady Tekla, you have nothing further to fear from Count Bertrich, for your uncle seems to hold him in less fear than you do yourself."

"Thank God for that!" said the Countess, fervently, with an involuntary shudder. She stole a furtive glance at the young man before her. "Do you depart from Thuron on the morrow?" she asked, in a low voice.

"That rests largely with Count Heinrich—and—and with you. If you desire my presence, or my absence, I shall endeavour to fulfil your wish."

"Your own affairs will not be bettered by your absence from them I fear."

"Indeed," said Rodolph, with a laugh, "I doubt if it will make great difference either way."

"If that is truly the case, I would be—I think my uncle will need all the stout hearts he can muster round him."

"My own wish is to stay. But we will see what the morrow brings. Meanwhile, you are tired, and little wonder. I wish you good rest, and I am sure you may sleep in serene peace of mind, for your troubles are at an end."

With that he took leave of her, sighing to think they were no longer alone together, he her sole protector, and so it may have chanced that his eyes spoke what his lips dare not utter, but if this were the case Tekla had no censure for him, but sighed in company, though so lightly he did not hear as he turned away.

The ancient man, who was patiently waiting for him, had now a torch in his hand, which he lighted when he came to the courtyard, applying it to another

that flared in an iron receptacle fastened to the stone wall. He led the way to one of the round towers, and climbed slowly up a narrow stone stair, passing several doors, but stopping at none until he seemed to have reached the top. Then, resting his torch in an iron holder, he, with much effort, drew back heavy bolts and threw open the door. The torch lighted a round chamber in which were three narrow windows in the thick stone, wide at the inner surface of the wall, but narrowing to a mere slit, with scarce room for a man's hand to penetrate to the outer air. A pallet of straw lay by the wall furthest from the door, and there was in the room a rude table, and a ruder bench. The old servant placed the burning torch within the room, and muttering a good-night, withdrew, closing the door after him. A moment later Rodolph heard the bolts being shot into their places. He cried aloud, beating the stout oaken panels with the hilt of his rapier.

"Here, fellow. You are exceeding your instructions. The Count said nothing of my being barred in. I am no prisoner, but a guest."

But the old man did not draw the bolts.

"The instructions ever follow the order given. Take him to the round guest-chamber, says my Lord, which means also, bolt him in there."

Again Rodolph loudly protested, but the shuffling steps of his guide echoed hollow from the circular stair. The Emperor, when the last sound had ceased, threw himself, dressed as he was, on the straw, and an instant later was sound asleep.

CHAPTER XV.

CASTLE THURON MAKES A FULL MEAL.

THE sun, shining through one of the narrow slits in the circular wall, striking on Rodolph's face, woke him next morning, and when he sat on his straw pallet he saw that the door had been unbarred and thrown partly open. He walked down into the quiet courtyard, with its neglected garden, and glanced up at the windows of the suite of rooms which the women of the castle inhabited, but saw no signs of any of them. Passing through a hall he entered the outer courtyard, where the day before he had dismounted after his journey. The gates were wide apart, and the courtyard itself looked like a city market-place. The scene was one of hurry and animation. The enclosure was filled with rude carts, and with lowing cows and oxen that had drawn them, steaming after the exertion of dragging their heavy loads up the steep hill. A procession of others, waiting their turn, extended through the gateway and along the hillside road that led to it. The Black Count himself superintended the intake of sacks of grain and casks of wine, estimating rather than accurately measuring their value, and paying with his own hand for what was thus brought to his doors. Count Heinrich, like many other nobles of his time, had the right to coin gold and silver, and his mint-master had been busy all night striking off pieces of different sizes, each with a rude effigy of the Count on one face of the coin, and its value in Roman numerals on the other.

Heinrich seemed to be driving generous bargains, loudly demanding what the owner thought his contribution worth, and when the sum was tremblingly named,

giving often more than was asked, but never less. He acted like a man who had long defied public opinion, but who now, for reasons of his own, preferred to court it, not knowing how soon he might be in some measure dependent upon it. Rodolph learned that before midnight the wine from the upper valley had begun to come in, and that the Count, having been in council with his captains until that hour, had gone forth to make payment by torchlight, while his mint-master sent him from the cellars of the castle, bags of currency still warm from the crucible. Heinrich showed no sign of fatigue, but was as alert as any, standing on the stone steps that led to the castle door, a head or more above the throng, while two secretaries counted out the sums he demanded and handed them to him from the bags at his feet. His eagle eye covered the whole scene, and now and then when the incomers and outgoers became jammed in an apparently indissoluble tangle, wheels interlocking, and goads falling ineffectually on the patient backs of the cattle, the Count with stentorian voice and eloquent gesture would command one to back here, another to go forward there, whereupon the knot would be speedily unloosed and the business go forward as it should.

If the stout Heinrich had little mercy on himself he had none at all on his servitors. Panting men struggled with heavy sacks on their backs, disappearing through the open archway that led to the cellars, emerging empty handed, drawing sleeve across sweating brow, to bend back instantly under a fresh burden and return. Full casks of wine were rolled and lowered out of sight, as if the castle were some huge open-jawed monster who was swallowing a gigantic meal with little sign of repletion. Did a man pause but a moment to fill his lungs with the fresh morning air, the all-encompassing eye of the master had singled him out and a roar of rage made all within hearing tremble. It was evident that peasant and servitor alike, officer and foot soldier, were in deadly terror of the Black Count.

Rodolph made his way up to the battlements and looked down on this stirring scene. Then he walked along the walls to gain some idea of the castle's strength and situation. There was a broad level promenade parallel to the river front, protected by a strong machicolated parapet. The promenade ran due north and south, and was nearly a hundred yards in length. At each end of the castle, but some distance back from the front, rose a round tower, the north tower being slightly lower than its brother. Behind the north tower was a precipitous wooded cliff falling steeply down to the little river Thaurand. The northern, eastern, and southern sides of the slope, at the top of which the castle stood, were densely wooded. The western slope, descending some hundreds of feet to the Moselle, was covered with vines, through which, beginning near the northern end of the stronghold, ran at steep incline the stout wall that ended at the river, carrying on its back here and there a stumpy square stone guard-house. Clustered at the foot of this wall, and stretching along the edge of the Moselle, lay the small village of Alken, over which was thrown the dark shadow of the Black Count's castle. Beyond it flowed the broad smooth river, placid as a sheet of glass, reflecting, far down, the forest-covered hills of its western bank.

At the junction of the hollow river wall with the castle, there stood on the terrace, at either side of the up-springing causeway, a huge, clumsy catapult, one commanding the northern face of the wall coming up from the river, the other the southern side. Here and there, at the edge of the promenade furthest from the parapet, were piled, with some attempt at symmetry, many hundreds of round pieces of granite, each considerably larger than a man's head, and each weighing as much as a man might care to lift. These spheres were ammunition for the catapult, and Rodolph saw that the Count appreciated not only the necessity of guarding his way to the river, but also the difficulty the Archbishop's men would find, in the face of

hurling granite, to force a breach in the stonework. All in all, Arnold had a hard nut to crack in Castle Thuron, defended as it was by a man of resource and resolute determination.

On the opposite shore of the river Rodolph saw collected many ox-carts, while the three boats which the day before had been drawn up on the bank at Alken, were busy ferrying over the produce brought by the carts. Sturdy villagers with bags on their backs were slowly plodding up the hill to the castle, ignoring the zig-zag road, and coming steeply and straight up the lanes between the rows of vines.

As Rodolph leaned against the stone parapet watching the villagers crawling like laden ants up the slopes, he was accosted by the cheery voice of the English archer.

"I hope you have slept well, my Lord," he said.

"Excellently. And you?"

"Never better. With the blue sky above me and my mind at peace with all the world; a bed of moss and a sloping hillside, that the water may speedily run away should a shower come on, no man can ask for better resting-place."

"Good Heaven! The Count did not turn you thus inhospitably adrift on the landscape surely? He has roof enough and room enough to give you some choice of a sleeping chamber."

"Oh, the Count's intentions were doubtless fair enough; I make no complaint of his Blackness. That he is uncivilised and knows nothing of the courtesy that pertains to a guest, is the fault of his upbringing and should not be justly charged against him. I was taken to a dark vault and barred in, the which I never can put up with, unless I am a legal prisoner, and even then only if it fall in with my convenience. I had some thought of slaying my jailor and taking his head with me to the Count, to demand an unbarred door, but the rascal was too quick for me, and before I fathomed his inhospitable intent, had thrust bolt in socket, himself safely on the outside, scorning

my protestations. A fastened door gives me a sense of suffocation that I find ill to abide. I tested the door by various expedients which lie at the hand of an experienced soldier, but found it proof against them all. Window there was none, but the open chimney gave me a speedy way, working with hands and knees, to the roof. The moon, just past the full, was shining brightly, and at some risk to my bones I got from roof to lower roof, and so at last to the battlements, where by trusting my body somewhat precipitously to the top of a tree, I won my road to the ground outside the castle. There I made myself a bed and was awakened as a man should be, by the singing of the birds, after a most refreshing night of it. I wandered about in the forest testing the different trees to find timber for the making of arrows, or a bow if need be, although I found little suitable for the latter. With these branches of timber I presented myself at the entrance gate to the no small amazement of the guards, and found all in a bustle, with the buying and selling of grain. Henry Schwart espied me as soon as I entered, notwithstanding the throng, and he roared out how the devil I came there, and who had unbarred the door, whereat I laughed at him, and said they kept such loose watch at Thuron that an industrious man might have cut all their throats while they slept, had he been so minded, and this brought greater blackness into Heinrich's face than I had hitherto seen there."

"If a suggestion does you any good," said Rodolph, with some severity, "I would not make his Lordship the subject of mirth."

"Indeed, my Lord, your words are full of wisdom, which I marvel at considering your youth; but with me it is usually the word first and the thought after, which may be likened to putting the cart before the cow, as they would say in these parts. No; I saw that Heinrich did not enjoy my merriment, but what was I to do when the laugh had already echoed from the stone walls, and was thus beyond recall. He sent

one messenger to my room, and another to yours, with instructions to leave your door open and unbarred, which seemed to show that the Black Count may still be judiciously taught by good example. The messenger to your room reported you to be sleeping soundly, while the one to mine said the door was still bolted, which was undoubtedly true, for I had not meddled with it. But I much fear, as you have already hinted, that I have forfeited the love Heinrich bore me yesterday, when I pointed an arrow at his heart, for when I asked permission to go to Treves (granted that I received your leave) he opened his eyes till they were round as targets, and cried that he would see me in the region of the condemned with pleasure, but not to Treves, which I took as an ill-natured remark, given coarsely as he put it."

"To Treves? Why to Treves of all places in the world? How could you expect Count Heinrich to permit you to go to Treves from this castle when he is in momentary anticipation of being besieged by Treves?"

"I told him I should return unless I was decapitated by the Archbishop or Count Bertrich, in which case he could hardly look to me to keep my tryst with him. I have a friend whom I left near Treves, from whence, if I succeeded in getting employment, I was to send him word, so that he too might have a place beside me. In case of not hearing from me he was to betake himself to Treves and there make inquiry regarding me; that, I fear, he has done, or is about to do, and I wish to engage him on my side in this quarrel. It has been our fate this many a year to be in opposing camps, and thus not only are we deprived of each other's company, but our lives are placed in jeopardy, each through the marksmanship of the other; and while I should as fain take my departure from this world on one of Roger's shafts as otherwise, yet it would grieve him ever after, for he is a tender hearted man as ever let fly unerring arrow. It would greatly advantage Black Heinrich, had he but sense to see it,

to let me go to Treves and bring back Roger Kent with me."

"Is he then an archer also? There surely cannot be two such."

"No, there is none like him. He regards me as his most promising pupil, but that is merely because of his fondness for me, who will patiently listen to the poetry he makes."

"Is he a poet as well? Such a man, if he betters you in shooting, must write most stirring of war."

"He is the greatest of poets, for so he himself admitted to me. He writes poetry that no man on earth can understand, and if that be sign of greatness, it must be as he says. He has slight conceit of himself as an archer, in which craft I know him to be unequalled, but I am no judge of his verses, although they read most soothingly and put a man to sleep when aught else fails. He writes not of war, my Lord, but of love. He indites verses to many foreign virgins of ancient times, whose very names I am never able to remember, and he has marvellous pages on the birds and the woods and mosses, and all flowers that grow, which, he says, speak to him in a language of their own, and that I can well believe, for I have no understanding of it. And he has penned many touching lines on the blessings of peace, though how he could earn his threepence a day if peace abounded, is something which even he, poet as he is, cannot explain."

"I think such a soldier would be an acquisition to our garrison, and I shall see whether Count Heinrich can be persuaded to allow you a visit in Treves, although I can well understand his reluctance, fearing the losing of so valuable an archer as yourself. I also have a message to send to Treves, so perhaps we shall prevail on the Count to think better of his decision. You gave me the name of your friend, but I have never yet learned your own."

"I am called John Surrey, my Lord. I am Saxon, as you may see, but Roger is a Norman, tall and thin and nearly as black as Heinrich himself. We should

be enemies and not friends, for the Normans conquered the Saxons, but as that conquest is now some time past, and I saw not how to better the matter by my interference so long as the Normans had such archers as Roger; and as he could get none of his own countrymen to listen to his poetry, we had need of each other, and our only grievance is that we fight usually on opposite sides, the which I should in this instance amend if the Count but let me to Treves before the Archbishop has Roger enlisted. If there is a tumult in Treves and men are called for, he will be one of the first to offer himself, thinking to find me in the ranks, for he knows that it was to take service with Arnold that I journeyed forth."

"I have, as I said, a message to send to Treves, so I shall speak to the Count on behalf of your mission, but I doubt if he will risk the loss of one archer like you on the remote chance of gaining two such later."

"Am I then in the Count's service and not in yours? Have you transferred me to him, my Lord?"

"Not so. You are at present my archer regiment, which I hope to increase in number as opportunity serves, but we must now do our best to aid the Count, having helped in some measure to bring on his dilemma."

"With right good will, my Lord, so be it that he treats a man not as a slave or prisoner, and if it come to hanging, or the like, I would rather be hanged by you than by the Count."

Rodolph smiled and said:

"You may be sure I shall not deliver up to the Count whatever rights I possess regarding your fate. I have always insisted on the esteemed privilege of hanging my own men; it is not an advantage I would willingly bestow upon another."

"In that your Lordship is wise," answered the bowman, soberly, "for the relinquishing of apparently trivial pretensions is generally followed by increased encroachment. I shall now bid your Lordship good-morning, for I must betake myself to the workshops

of the castle and there teach a knave Heinrich has given me, the proper making of arrows, the which is likely to be a task of some duration, for the rascal does not seem over-bright, and the Germans have little skill, at best, in the accurate manufacture of shafts, and the correct balancing of them. I hold it well to prepare for the coming of the Archbishop, and meet him with suitable offerings, lest he suspect us of disrespect to his high station."

"I hope he will appreciate your thoughtfulness," said the Emperor, whereupon the archer descended from the battlements.

Rodolph rested his arms on the parapet and gazed at the peasants toiling slowly up the incline from the river with their burdens. As the sun rose higher and higher the shadow of the great castle also moved imperceptibly up the slope, as if emulating the labourers. The houses of Alken, closely packed together, as was the case with all mediæval villages, stood brilliantly out in the sunshine, now that the shadow of the castle was removed from them. In the clear air every stone of the place stood distinctly out, and it seemed so surprisingly near that one might have imagined he had but to stretch down his hand and touch its roofs. From its streets came up the merry laughter of children, joyous at the unusual bustle going forward, having not the slightest idea of the ominous meaning which the hurrying to and fro brought to older minds.

A musical greeting caused the Emperor to start from his reverie and turn suddenly round. The Countess Tekla stood before him, smiling, and seeming herself a spirit of the morning. To Rodolph she appeared to be robed magnificently, and he wondered how she came by all this finery, which suited her so well, making her look the great lady she undoubtedly was. Notwithstanding her youth, there was an unconscious dignity about her that awed him, even though he was accustomed to the splendour of the grand dames who thronged his now deserted Court at

Frankfort. Could this be the girl who had come through such rough usage with him from Treves to Thuron, standing now like a fair goddess of the Moselle in her queenly beauty? Here was one indeed to fight for and to die for, if necessity arose, thinking oneself blessed for the privilege. Her head was coroneted by a semi-circular band of gold, encrusted with jewels. Behind her fair neck the rich profusion of hair was kept in bounds by a clasp of finely-wrought silver, from which imprisonment it then flowed unimpeded, the colour of ripened wheat, each thread apparently spun from the golden beams of the sun itself. It covered her like a mantle, making even the embroidered splendour of her gown seem poor by comparison.

To this radiant vision so unexpectedly risen before him, the Emperor bowed with the slow, lowly deference of a courtier to his monarch, speechless for the moment through the emotions that stirred within him.

The girl laughed merrily at his confusion.

"You must not so critically regard me, my Lord," she said. "My wardrobe is elsewhere, as you know, and I have been compelled to explore this grim castle for the wherewithal to attire myself, finding more of coats of mail than of ladies' adornments, for it is long since feminine vanity dwelt herein, so I have been compelled to piece out this with that, to make myself presentable, and I feel like one engaged in a masquerade, tricking myself out as they tell me the ladies do at some grand function given by the Emperor at Frankfort."

"My Lady, the Emperor's Court is lit by candles; I stand now in the radiance of the sun."

The lady turned her dancing eyes upon him.

"If that is a compliment, my Lord, 'tis fit for Frankfort itself; if it merely refers to the undoubted fact that the sun is shining bravely on you, and that the Court is dim by comparison, think not you will deter me from going there, for I should dearly love to witness the pageantry of the capital."

"Indeed, Countess, if you fail to do so it will not be through lack of invitation."

"When invitation comes I shall eagerly accept it."

"I sincerely trust you will, my Lady."

"Perhaps you also will be there, and may not have forgotten me. If I see you, I shall ask you to point out to a stranger those who are notable."

"Such is my most devout wish, although I lacked the courage to give expression to it."

"But I breathe a warning to you. My uncle tells me you spoke slightly of the Emperor last night. I was grieved to hear it, for I am a loyal subject of his, and were I a man, would draw sword, did any in my presence allude to the head of the state in other terms than those of respect."

"Knowing your pleasure, I shall be careful not to offend again. Still, in my own defence, I should like to say that I spoke only of faults that the Emperor himself would be the first to admit. An Emperor should be an Emperor, and not a nonentity whose wish commands but slight attention."

The lady drew herself up, a slight frown marring the smoothness of her brow.

"You pay little heed to my request, and while professing to comply, offend the more. A loyal noble would scarce call his Emperor a nonentity."

"Look around you, Countess. Here are going forward busy preparations for war. Does the Count appeal to his over-lord against the suspected incursion of the Archbishop? 'T would be grotesque to hint that such a thought ever occurred to him. Does the Archbishop send an envoy to Frankfort acquainting the Emperor with his purpose and asking leave to launch an army against Thuron? Not so. He doffs his clerical vestments and dons a coat of mail, as mindless of the Emperor as if no such person existed. Here red-handed war is about to open within a day's journey of the capital, in the centre of the Emperor's domains, and if he ever hears of it, 'twill be because some friend tells him. That jumps not with my idea of the high office."

"But the Emperor is at the Holy War in foreign lands."

"Then should he instead stand where I stand, in the midst of the unholy war in his own land, to stop it or to guide it."

"If you think thus," said the girl, perplexed at the confident tone of the young man, and forgetting the censure she had just pronounced upon him, "why have you left his side? Why do you not say to him what you say of him to me?"

"Indeed, my Lady," replied Rodolph with a laugh, "I have but little influence with his Majesty. Often has he pursued a course that has not met with my approval, being turned aside from great policies of state by the sight of a pretty face. You could sway him, Countess, where I should be helpless. But I know that he has lately met one, who can if she likes, make a great Emperor of him, should he prove capable of a distinguished career, so my part in his reformation will count for little."

"Then she will do so, of course, and be proud of the opportunity," cried the Countess, eagerly.

"Perhaps. Who can tell what a woman may do? It is my earnest hope that she prove not unwilling."

"Is she beautiful?"

"The divinest—yes, she is accounted so."

In spite of Tekla's enthusiasm for the welfare of her Emperor, the ardour with which the young man began his eulogy regarding the unknown lady in question, and the quick suppression of the same, did not escape her notice, nor did it bring that satisfaction which a moment before Tekla had anticipated. She turned her eyes from him and allowed them to wander over the wide and peaceful landscape, whose beauty was so much enhanced by the winding, placid river.

Then she said suddenly, obviously apropos of the labouring peasants:

"We shall be in little danger of starvation in Thuron, unless the siege be long."

"I am not so sure of that," replied Rodolph. "I

had no supper last night, and this morning none has said to me 'This is the way to the dining hall.'"

"Do you mean that you have not yet breakfasted?" cried Tekla, turning to him with quick surprised interest. "And I have been standing here censuring a hungry man. You must think our race a most ungrateful one."

"I had no such thought. But your mention of starvation reminded me that I am rather in the condition of a famishing garrison myself."

"Then come with me at once. I will be your hostess, and will endeavour to recompense you for the inhospitality of the castle. There is a delightful balcony overlooking the quiet inner courtyard, and there we shall spread your repast. Come."

The Emperor followed her, and presently arrived at the balcony she had spoken of, overhanging the neglected garden. It was, indeed, a pleasant spot in so stern a fortress, shut off by heavy velvet hangings from the apartment out of which it projected and forming thus a little square room half inside the castle and half in the open air.

Rodolph sat at the table with the Countess opposite him, while Hilda waited on them. Tekla chatted as her *vis-à-vis* broke his long fast.

"I intend to make this plot of ground my care, and, while all others are busy fighting for me, I shall be peacefully engaged in gardening. I hope to interest my aunt in horticulture. Poor woman, she seems to have little to occupy her mind in this prison, and I fear her husband pays scant attention to her. Him too I shall cultivate if I get an opportunity. He has need of civilisation, for he scarce seems to believe that women have a right to exist, and his wife has for years been so patient and uncomplaining, that he has been confirmed in his neglect of her."

"I have already cautioned my archer this morning not to encroach too boldly on his Lordship's good nature, which the Count seems to have but short stock of. May I venture to suggest that the

task of reforming him will be more safely accomplished perhaps when your Ladyship occupies your strongest castle, with a stout garrison about you?"

"Have no fear, my Lord. He came to us last night and sat talking to me as smoothly as if he were the Archbishop himself—in truth, much more smoothly than the Archbishop has lately spoken. He sat there with his elbow on the table looking fixedly at me, quite ignoring his wife, who trembled with fear while he was in the room, and groaned aloud when I spoke my mind to him on one or two occasions. He said that we two were the only kin each had and should think much of each other. I told him frankly I should be pleased to think much of him as soon as I saw occasion to do so, but that what I had seen of him heretofore had not made me proud of the kinship. My Lady caught her breath and looked imploringly at me, but he, frowning, gazed sternly at me, first saying nothing, then after a long silence muttering: 'I would you were a man.' 'Indeed, uncle,' I replied, 'such was my own wish this afternoon, when, instead of throwing myself at your feet I might have drawn sword and taught good manners in Thuron.' Then you should have seen him. His brow was like midnight, and his eyes blazed. He started up in wrath, and I little wondered that my Lady moaned and wrung her hands, but I laughed and returned his look without flinching, although I may confess to you I was as frightened as when in Cochem. But his frown cleared away, and something almost resembling a twinkle came into his piercing eyes. I am sure there was at least the beginning of a smile under his black beard as he said, quite in kindly tone, 'We are, indeed, relatives, Tekla.' He placed his hand on my head as if I were a little child, sighed, turned on his heel and strode away without further farewell. My aunt gazed wonderingly at me as if I had baited a bear, and had unexpectedly come forth unscathed."

"Which is exactly my own opinion. I beg of you not to repeat the experiment."

Tekla looked archly at him across the table, with a smile on her face like the play of sunshine on the fair surface of the river.

“Why should I repeat it, my Lord? It is only men who do that, and as your former advice was given to a man, it was of course well placed. A man always repeats. Oh, I know his formula. First there is the haughty word; next the sneering reply; then a mounting flush of anger to the forehead, and hand on the hilt of the sword. It always ends with the sword, for the men have little patience and less originality. With a woman it must be different, for she carries no sword, and her ingenuity is her only weapon. My dark uncle, when he reflects slowly on his treatment, will come at last to a conclusion regarding what he shall do when next I laugh at him. But when he visits us again I shall be most kind to him, and he will learn with amaze how pleasant he finds it when he acts less like a bear with his women folk. I shall take him to this balcony and feed him tenderly. Hilda knows the method of preparing some culinary dainties, which are common enough at Treves, but utterly unknown at Thuron. On each occasion my dear uncle will find me different, and whatever plan he prepares for one method of attack, will be utterly useless when confronted with another. I can see he is an unready man, and I shall never give him time to build up a line of defence while he is with me. Oh, if the Archbishop attacks Thuron with half the skill with which I shall besiege my uncle, then is the castle doomed. And in the end you shall find that my dark uncle will so dearly assess me that he will fight for me against a whole house of Archbishops.”

“I can well believe that,” said Rodolph, with undisguised admiration.

Before Tekla could reply a wild cheer went up from the further courtyard, echoed by a fainter cheer outside the castle. Rodolph started to his feet and listened as the acclamations continued.

“Run, Hilda,” cried the Countess. “Find the cause of the outcry and bring us tidings of it.”

When the girl breathlessly returned she said they were hoisting on the great southern tower the broad flag of Thuron, and that the people were cheering as if they were mad, but the cause of it all she could not learn.

“The Archbishop’s army is very likely in sight,” said Rodolph, “although how that can be, unless Arnold has sent it close on Bertrich’s heels, I cannot understand. Perhaps Bertrich has met it between the castle and Cochem and has returned with it. Let us go and see.”

CHAPTER XVI.

THE COUNTESS TRIES TO TAME THE BEAR.

ONCE more Tekla and Rodolph found themselves on the battlements. The flag hung listless at the top of the pole in the still air, as if the time for action had not yet arrived. On a hill summit further up the river another flag was fluttering, and on the other side, still more distant, a third flag was being slowly raised against the sky. Whether or not this betokened the coming of the Archbishop, Rodolph could not determine. The nearer flag seemed to be of the same design as the one that hung over Thuron; the third flag was too far away to allow its character to be discerned. The line of peasants winding up from the river and stretching along the banks had taken up the cheering which echoed lustily from hill to hill. It was evident that that most infectious malady, the war spirit, was abroad, for fighting songs, ringing and truculent, with swinging, inspiring choruses, were being chanted in the village and along the river. Some rumour or suspicion of what was going forward had undoubtedly permeated the mass of people collected within and under shadow of the castle; Rodolph felt the enthusiasm of coming battle in the air. Yet these people had always been tyrannised over by the Black Count, and this was probably the first time he had paid for what he took from them. Nevertheless, they were shouting for him, and woe betide the man who now raised his voice against him. As Rodolph looked on in wonderment, the Black Count himself came up the steps that led to the lofty promenade, and there was a gleam of fierce delight in his dark eye as he swept it over the animated scene.

Some of the songs sung had evidently not been intended as complimentary to the Count when they were originally composed, but now the singers had either forgotten the first import of the words, or had added others that turned censure into laudation. The burden of the chorus in one of them was "The Devil is black," a line oft repeated, and ending with a phrase which betokened the ultimate fate of his sable majesty. Although some unthinkingly, carried away by the enthusiasm of the occasion, repeated the old ending, the majority gave the new rendering, which was to the effect that their devil was more than a match for any other devil in existence. The Count as he approached the two young people standing by the parapet, had shaken off much of his habitual gloom, and was even humming to himself the catching refrain referring to the blackness of the devil, quite unheeding any personal reference it might contain.

"Good day to you, my Lord Count," said Rodolph. "You have had little rest since I last spoke with you. Do the flags on the hill-tops betoken the coming of Treves?"

"No, they are my signals, already agreed upon, to let the peasants know the castle can hold no more. Thuron has had a full meal, and now let Arnold come on when he pleases: we are ready for him."

"Shall you not follow the castle's example, uncle?" said Tekla. "You must be both tired and hungry. I have a meal in preparation for you."

"Hungry always; tired never. The loss of one night's sleep is nothing to me. If it were ten I might wrap my coat about me and look for a corner to lie down in. I shall eat with my men in the great hall, child, so never depend upon me for a table companion, but dine when and where it pleases you. I place few restrictions upon those within these walls, and suffer none at all to bind myself. Go therefore to your apartments; the ramparts are for men-at-arms and not for women. I wish to have some words with this gentleman."

"Nay, but uncle," pleaded Tekla, in a pretty tone of entreaty, placing her small white hand on his gigantic stalwart arm, "I have appointed myself caterer of the castle and must not have my housewifely arts so slighted by the chief thereof."

"Uncle me not so frequently," he cried, with rude impatience, trying to shake off her hand; but it clung there like a snowflake against a piece of rock. "I am rarely in the humour for pretty phrases. I am not a man of words, but a man of action."

"Then, mine only uncle, as you yourself reminded me last night, come and show yourself a man of action against the meal I shall prepare for you."

Black Heinrich glanced helplessly at Rodolph with so much of comic discomfiture that the young man had some ado to keep his countenance.

"If I had a score of uncles," continued Tekla, "I might lavish my kindness on them one after another; as I have but one he must be patient with me, and take to my civilising influence with the best grace he may. You will come then when I send for you?"

"Well, well," said the Count gruffly, so that his giving way might attract the less notice, "if you leave us now, I will go."

When Tekla had departed and the two men were left alone together, Rodolph was the first to speak.

"I know not what you have to say to me, my Lord Count, but I have something to say to you. Last night you told me I was not a prisoner, yet was I treated like one when I left you. I protested against being barred in, and was informed that when you ordered a guest to the round chamber, the bolting was included in the hospitality. I should like, therefore, to know what my standing is in this castle. Am I a prisoner at night, and a free man during the day, or what?"

"It is on that subject that I wish to speak with you," said the Black Count. "We were in a mixed company last night, and it was not convenient for me to enter into explanations, which I propose now to do."

I am still in some ignorance concerning your part in this flight from Treves. Perhaps you will first tell me exactly who you are, what is your quality, and where your estates lie, if you have any?"

Rodolph had anticipated such inquiry and had thought deeply how he should answer when it was propounded. He had come to the conclusion that there would be great danger in making full confession to the Black Count, known far and near as a ruthless marauder, who, but for the strength and practically unassailable position of his castle, would have been laid by the heels long before, if not by Emperor or Archbishop, or surrounding nobles, by the banded merchants on whom he levied relentless tribute. To put such a man in possession of the fact that he had in his power the Emperor of all the land, was to take a leap into a chasm, the bottom of which no eye could see. With such an important hostage what might not the ambition of the Black Count tempt him to do? No friend that Rodolph possessed had the slightest hint of the Emperor's position. It would be as difficult for him to get out of Thuron without its owner's permission, as it was like to prove for the Archbishop to get in. The Black Count was surrounded by daring and reckless men, to whom his word was law, and it was not probable that, in case of need, Rodolph could hold his sword aloft and shout 'The Emperor,' with any hope that a single warrior would rally to his side. He had learned much in his short journey through his own domains. He found that where his own title had no magic in its sound, the cry of 'The Archbishop,' had placed an army at his command, and had turned the tide of battle that had threatened to overwhelm him at Bruttig. If then he ever hoped to make the name of the Emperor as potent a spell, he must, until he reached Frankfort again, keep his identity a secret. Therefore he fell back on the old fiction that he was a silk merchant at Frankfort, in support of which he had a passport to show.

"My Lord Count, this passport will tell you my

name and quality, and will also give reason for my journey from Frankfort to Treves, at which latter place, through an entirely unexpected series of circumstances, I came to lend aid to your niece in her escape from Arnold's stronghold. Until I arrived in Treves a few short days ago I had never heard of the lady. I am, as you will see by the parchment you hold in your hand, a silk merchant of Frankfort, who journeyed to Treves with a friend, to discover there the prospect of trade."

"A merchant!" cried Heinrich, frowning, and making no effort to conceal the contempt in which he held such a calling. "I understood you to say last night that you were noble, and laid claim to the title of lord."

"I am as noble as yourself, my Lord Count, although not so renowned. Many of us in these times of peace have taken to trade, and yet are none the less ready to maintain our nobility at the point of the sword, should our title be called into question. Indeed I have heard that you yourself have on various occasions engaged in traffic of silk and other merchandise which passes your doors, and have become rich by such dealing. The only difference between you and me as traders is that I make less profit in the transaction than you do, as I am compelled to pay for the goods I resell."

Heinrich bent his lowering brow over the parchment he held in his hand, but whether it conveyed any meaning to his mind or not, Rodolph was unable to conjecture. There was, for some moments, silence between them, then the Count spoke:

"Are you a rich merchant?"

"I am not poor."

"You have had a hand in bringing me to the pass I find myself in, it is but right then that you should see me out, or further in; but right or wrong it is my intention to hold you, and if disaster comes, I shall make you bear some share in it. It is useless for me to demand ransom for you now, because if the Arch-

bishop knock down my house he will lay hands on whatever treasure lies therein. When we come to an end of the siege then I shall compound with you on terms that may seem to me just or otherwise, depending in a measure on how you hereafter comport yourself. If you give me your word of honour that you will make no attempt to leave the castle without my permission, then I will accept it as you accepted mine yesterday, and you shall be as free as any man within the castle. If you will not give me your word then you are prisoner, and shall be treated as such; in fact, I have some men-at-arms within call who will at once convey you to the round chamber, there to rest until my contest with the Archbishop is decided."

"Then, my Lord, is your word of little value, for you promised that I should be free to pursue my way to Frankfort in the morning if the archer spared you."

"Not so. I promised you your life."

"Very well. We shall have no argument about it. I give you my word, and I swear to keep it as faithfully as you have kept yours."

Heinrich looked sternly at his guest with a suspicious expression which seemed to say: "Now what devilish double meaning is there in that?"

Up from the outside of the walls came the chorus "The Devil is black," and Rodolph smiled as the refrain broke the stillness.

"Do you mean to impugn my word?" Heinrich said aloud.

"Nothing is further from my intention. I mean to emulate it. It is my ambition to keep my word as fully as you keep yours, and you can ask no better guarantee than that, can you? The truth is I am as anxious to see the outcome of this contest as you are, and I intend to be in the thick of it. If you imprison me, the chances are that you will thrust bolt on the only man of brains in the place, not excepting your august self, for although you may be a stubborn fighter, I doubt if you know much of strategy, or can see far ahead of your prominent nose. So, my Lord, you

may act as best pleases you, and call up all the men-at-arms in the castle, if their presence comforts you. If you trust me, I may, at a critical moment, be of vast assistance to you. It is even possible that should the Archbishop press you too closely, I may, by slipping out of Thuron, make way through his camp and, gathering my own men, fall on him unexpectedly from behind, thus confusing your foe. If you choose to treat me as a prisoner, then do you put your wits against mine, and you will wake up some morning to find three of your best men gone. So, my Lord, ponder on that, and lay what course you choose."

It was plain that the unready Count was baffled by the free and easy manner in which the other addressed him. The same feeling of mental inferiority which he had felt in Rodolph's presence the night before, again came over him, and, while it angered him, his caution whispered the suggestion that here was a possible ally who might in stress prove most valuable. Never had Heinrich met one apparently helpless, who seemed so careless what his jailer might think or do. The Count wished he had braved the archer's shaft, taken the risk of it, and hanged this man out of hand. However, it was too late to think of that now, and he asked, keeping control of his rising temper:

"How many men answer to your call?"

"Enough to make the Archbishop prefer, at any time, that they be not thrown in the scale against him. More than enough when he faces so doughty and brave a warrior as the devil of Thuron, regarding whose colour and fate those peasants outside are chanting."

"I take your word," cried Heinrich, with sudden impetuosity. "I should, of course, allow you to go free to Frankfort, but I beg of you to remain with me. I ask you not to leave until you have consulted with me, but, excepting that condition, you are as free of the castle as I am."

"Spoken like a true nobleman, and on such basis we shall have no fault to find with each other. And now I

request your permission to send a messenger at once to Treves."

"To Treves!" cried the Black Count, the old look of fierce suspicion coming again into his piercing eyes. "Why to Treves? The archer wants to go to Treves. You want to send to Treves. It is nothing but Treves, Treves, Treves, till I am sick of the name. Why to Treves?"

"It is a very simple matter, my Lord Count. I told you I came from Frankfort with a friend. I also informed you that I took this journey down the Moselle most unexpectedly. My friend, who distrusts the Archbishop as much as you distrust him, and more if that be possible, is now in Treves not knowing what has become of me. He will imagine that the Archbishop has me by the heels, and may get himself into trouble by attempting my liberation. I wish, therefore, to get word to him of my whereabouts, not only that his just anxiety may be relieved, but also that if we are hard pressed, he may come to our timely rescue."

"If we are to trust each other, I must have fuller knowledge. Who is your friend?"

"The Baron von Brunfels."

"What? Siegfried von Brunfels of the Rhine? The friend of the Emperor?"

"The same."

"He has enough retainers of his own to raise the siege of Thuron if he wished to do so."

"That is true. All the more reason then that he should be acquainted with the fact that his friend is here, for, from what I have heard him say of you, he would never stir a man through love of Heinrich of Thuron."

"If Baron von Brunfels is your friend, you are no merchant."

"Indeed, I have often thought so; for I make some amazingly bad bargains."

"Should the Archbishop and his men come on, it will not be possible for a single horseman to get through to Treves. I do not wish to lose the archer,

nor can I spare one of my own men. Do you intend yourself to go to Treves."

"No. Neither do I desire to lose the archer, even though he should bring back his equal with the bow, which would be his purpose in setting out. He has a friend, he says, who excels him in skill, although that I doubt. I desire to send my own man, Conrad, who knows Treves, and who was in the employ of the Baron. He will win his way through if any one can, and may bring the other archer back with him. Besides, there is a chance that the crafty Arnold is not yet on the move, and it would be interesting to learn something of what is going on in Treves, and what happened when the valiant Count Bertrich returned to his master. This, Conrad can discover much more effectually than the archer, for he is intelligent, and loves not the sound of his own voice as does our bowman. Conrad is a listener rather than a talker; I cannot say the same for the skilful arrow-maker."

In deep doubt Black Heinrich stood gazing on the stones at his feet. He was outmanœuvred, yet knew not how to help himself. Full authority was his, yet the control of affairs seemed slipping from his grasp. He had not entertained the slightest intention of allowing any one from the castle to depart for Treves, yet here he felt he was about to consent. He chafed at the turn things had taken, but knew not how to amend them. If he refused permission to everything proposed, he feared he might be making a fool of himself, and acting against his own interests, and worse, that the cool confident young man would know he was making a fool of himself, and despise him accordingly; still, he was loath to allow even the semblance of power to pass away from him.

"I like not this traffic with Treves," he said, at last.

"Nor do I. Still I am determined in some fashion to let Brunfels know where I am. Further than that I shall tell him nothing, if such knowledge is against your wish; but if you give your consent I shall ask him to keep an eye on this siege; and if, as is very likelv.

you beat off Arnold, he is not to interfere, but if you are getting the worst of it, there is little harm in having a friend outside on whom we can, in emergency, call. It all rests with you, my Lord ; I merely make suggestions, and if they do not jump with your liking then they are of little value. Your experience is greater than mine, and your courage is unquestioned. A man less brave might hesitate to lay plans for emergencies, but with you it is different. Therefore you have but to command and I shall obey. I shall send word to Brunfels of my own safety to relieve his anxiety, and I shall ask him to keep an eye on the siege if you care to have me do so. It can at least bring us no harm."

The Count looked at the speaker with an expression in which distrust seemed to be fighting with gratification. There was at first a lurking fear that the young man was trifling with him, but the other's serene countenance gave no indication of lack of earnestness, and Heinrich's own self-esteem was so great that no praise of his courage could seem to him overdrawn. When all suspicion of Rodolph's good faith had been allayed, he said, heartily :

"Send what message you will to the Baron. We may be none the worse for a stroke from him at the right time."

With that the Count strode away, and Rodolph gave his instructions to Conrad, watching him ride from the gates in the direction of the Frankfort road, with the passport of the silk merchant in his pocket.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE ENVOY'S DISASTROUS RETURN.

THE sun rose and set, and rose and set again, before news came to Castle Thuron. There was no sign of an enemy ; the Mosèlle valley, as seen from the round towers, seemed a very picture of peace. During these two days the air was still, the flag drooped, unflattering, from its staff, and the sun shone warmly in the serene heavens. Yet there was something ominous in the silence, and each person in the castle felt, more or less, the tension of the time. Black Heinrich scanned the distance from the battlements with growing impatience, for, like all men of action, he chafed at the delay and was eager for the fight to come on, even should it prove disastrous to him. Anything seemed better than this newsless waiting. The huge gates were never opened ; in fact, it was now impossible to open them, for the outer courtyard was partly filled with sacks of grain and butts of wine, which were piled in a great heap against the two leaves of the gate, and any one desiring to depart from the castle had to climb down from the platform over the gates by a ladder resting there, which could be pulled up at any moment's notice. The two days were a most enjoyable interval for Rodolph, who spent much of his time, in ever increasing delight, with the Countess Tekla. Yet there was an alloy in his happiness. He felt that he was not wise in lingering in Thuron, which at any moment might prove a trap from which escape was impossible, either through the Count learning who he actually was, and thereupon imprisoning him to make the most of his detention, or through the sudden beleaguering of the castle by forces from Treves. His

confidence that Conrad would reach his friend in the house by the city wall quieted his conscience, which with some persistence was telling him that he neglected duty and high affairs of state, all for the sake of spending the golden hours with a fascinating girl of nineteen.

But these qualms left him when in her presence, and as he spent much of his time with her, there was little chance for his conscience to work a reformation. He consoled himself with the reflection that a man can be young but once, and there was probably a long life before him which he could energetically devote to the service of his country. He knew that Baron von Brunfels would carry out faithfully his instructions in Frankfort, and if the Emperor's presence became necessary there, he would bring on a force that neither the Archbishop nor Black Heinrich could cope with, did either attempt to detain him against his will. He had unlimited faith in Brunfels' judgment, and thus he lulled disquieting thought. Nevertheless he knew that his place was at Frankfort and not in Thuron, where, if the turbulent Archbishop moved an armed man without his sovereign's consent, that sovereign could emerge from the capital at the head of the German army and bid the haughty prelate back to Treves; yet prudence told him such a course might plunge the country into civil war, for he knew not the exact military strength of the Archbishop, and was well aware that his own army should be considerably augmented before it undertook so hazardous a commission, for nothing short of overwhelming force might overawe the fighting Lord of Treves. In truth it was to see for himself what manner of man the Archbishop was, and to form some estimate of the forces at his back, that the secret journey to Treves had been taken, now so strangely deflected from its original purpose. Both the Emperor and von Brunfels believed that the present strength of the army at Frankfort was not sufficient to cope with the battalions of Treves, especially if the Archbishops of Cologne

and Mayence made common cause with their brother in the West—an eventuality not at all improbable. The first step then, should be the return of the Emperor to his capital, to be followed by a quiet increase of the imperial army until it reached such strength that no combination could prevail against it. Rodolph knew his duty, yet silken fetters held him from action. Had he been certain of the sentiments of Tekla regarding himself he would have spoken to her, without revealing his identity, and then might perhaps have made arrangement with her uncle by which he could proceed to Frankfort, but although the events of a lifetime had been compressed within the last week, yet he could not conceal from himself the fact that the Countess had known him for three or four days only, and he felt that to speak to her at the present moment would be premature. Of course it was quite within his right to assume his place at the head of the state once more, and demand the lady, in which case neither her guardian nor the Count would dare refuse, nor would one of them be the least likely to refuse, for Black Heinrich was not the man to underestimate the qualification of relationship with an Empress. But the Emperor was in no mind to follow the example of Count Bertrich, and accept an unwilling wife.

He set before himself the enticing task of winning the lady as a nameless lord, letting her imagine that he was perhaps not her equal in station or fortune, and then, when consent had been willingly gained, to demand her from his throne, allowing himself to dwell with pleasure on her amazement at learning that her Emperor and her lover were one and the same person.

But there was savage news in store for him, and for all within Castle Thuron; news that made his rosy dreams dissolve as the light river mists dissolve before the fierce midsummer sun. On the evening of the third day after Conrad's departure, an unkempt, tattered figure staggered from the forest and came tottering towards the gate of the castle. The archer,

on duty above the gate, drew string to ear and ordered the fugitive to halt and explain himself. The forlorn man raised his hands above his head, gave a despairing upward look, took two faltering steps forward and fell prone on his face, as the Bowman relaxing his weapon, and peering eagerly forward, cried aloud :

“ My God, it is Conrad ! ”

Then instantly forgetting his duty as guardian of the gate, he dropped bow and sprang down the ladder, running to his fallen comrade. The news spread through the castle with marvellous rapidity, and the Black Count and Rodolph were on the battlements above the gate before the archer and some of the garrison had hoisted the insensible man up the ladder.

“ Take him to the great hall ; he is wounded and seems famished as well. Perhaps a cup of wine will revive him ; meanwhile keep strict watch on the gate ; those who have pursued him cannot be far distant. Draw up the ladder and man the battlements, Steinmetz.”

The Captain at once gave the necessary commands, while those who had rescued Conrad carried him to the great hall and laid him on a bench. His clothes were in rags, and his face gaunt from fatigue or want. As Heinrich had suggested, a cup of wine held to his lips revived him, and, opening his eyes, he glanced at Rodolph and gasped :

“ We are completely surrounded, my Lord.”

“ Impossible ! ” cried Rodolph. “ The Archbishop could never have moved his troops so quickly.”

The Black Count said nothing, but scowled down on the wounded man, whose garments the leech was removing in order to apply ointment to wounds evidently caused by shafts from the crossbow. John Surrey looked on these wounds with a lofty contempt, muttering :

“ If I had drawn string at him there would be fewer hurts, but he would not be here to tell what happened.”

Conrad drank a full flagon of wine, which revived him sufficiently to enable him to tell his adventures. He had directed his horse towards the Roman road between Frankfort and Treves, but on approaching it saw troops. Turning back he proceeded further west, but came again upon armed men. In neither case was he himself seen. Retracing his way, he tried to pass to the west, nearer to the river, but there also he found an encampment. Surmising now that the wide space between the Roman road and the Moselle was in the Archbishop's hands, and that there was no chance of penetrating towards Treves in that direction, he resolved to make for Frankfort itself, get to the south of the Roman road, and reach Treves round about, through the great forest. To his amazement here also he saw portions of the army, and it began to dawn upon him that the castle was environed, at least on the south. He now determined to make no more attempts to break the circle, but return to Thuron and report the alarming situation he had discovered. In journeying through the forest towards the castle he came unexpectedly upon a camp, and there, for the first time, was seen by the enemy. He tried flight, but a crossbow bolt brought down his horse and resulted in his capture. It never occurred to those who held him prisoner, that he had come from Thuron; in fact they readily believed he was, what his passport proclaimed him, a merchant from Frankfort who was trying to reach Treves. They assured him that such a journey was impossible at the present moment, but said he could get through unmolested when the troops had drawn closer round Thuron. They kept him merely a nominal prisoner, paid little attention to him, and talked freely before him, having no suspicion that he belonged to the castle. Nothing was said of the flight of the Countess Tekla, and he surmised from this that her sudden departure was unknown. It was believed that the investment of Thuron had been projected for a long time, and that the Archbishop had struck thus

suddenly to take the Black Count unaware. From the fact that the troops had been sent along the Roman road in detachments, Conrad inferred that they were there when Count Bertrich had flung his glove on the floor of Thuron. In like manner part of an army had been sent down the river to Cochem, and from that place had pushed round the castle on the north side of the stream until they saw their comrades on the other shore, while between the two camps a chain had been stretched and all traffic up and down the river stopped. But the most startling part of Conrad's budget was this. The Archbishop of Cologne had come through the Eifel region to Treves and had joined hands with his colleague, Arnold von Isenberg. Troops were then marching up the Rhine from Cologne, and the two Electors had made common cause regarding the reduction of Thuron. The army of Treves had surrounded the castle, and would draw closer the moment the army of Cologne arrived. It was supposed that the speedy environment of the place was to prevent the Black Count and his company from escaping to the Rhine or to Frankfort. Conrad learned all this on the evening of the first day, and, watching his opportunity, made his escape, but was seen by the guards, whose bolts came near to making an end of him. For two nights and two days he wandered without food in the forest, not knowing his whereabouts, and following streams which he expected would lead him to the Moselle, but was often forced to abandon them because of the hostile parties encamped near their waters, and thus at last he had reached Thuron.

The Emperor listened to this recital, appalled at the position in which he found himself. With the two Archbishops besieging the castle, there would be small chance of his reaching Frankfort, and as the ultimate reduction of the castle was now certain, he would find himself the prisoner of his two turbulent and powerful subjects, Treves and Cologne, confronted with the problem of whether he preferred being

hanged as an accomplice of the dark marauder who stood by his side, or revealing his identity and taking what chance might offer when the knowledge was thus brought to the Archbishops. Meanwhile his friend, Baron von Brunfels, would not have the slightest inkling of his whereabouts, and if the disappearance of the Countess was thus kept secret, as seemed to be the intention of Arnold and Count Bertrich, Brunfels would not be able to hazard even a guess. However, there was this consolation, that at no time could he have escaped from Thuron. He was in effect trapped the moment he set foot within its gates. Had he, with the Countess, set out the following morning for Frankfort they would evidently have been intercepted by the Archbishop's troops, and had he alone attempted to reach his capital the same fate would have been in store for him. His only regret now was that von Brunfels must remain in ignorance of his position, but, as he had done his best to remedy that, he could only blame fate for its unkindness to him.

The Black Count listened in sombre taciturnity to Conrad's record and spoke no word when it was finished, but stood there in deep thought, his eyes on the floor. Rodolph was the first to break the ensuing silence.

"You see, my Lord Count, the case stands as I expected. It was Arnold's intention to have besieged you, and he has craftily entered into negotiations with Cologne, doubtless fearing to attack you alone. This scheme has been some time in concocting, and the flight of the Countess, so far from bringing on the contest, has merely given you bare time for preparation."

Heinrich gave utterance to an exclamation which can be designated only by the inelegant term, grunt. It was his favourite method of expression when perturbed. He did not raise his eyes from the floor, nor did he reply.

"The fact that two Archbishops instead of one do

you the honour to besiege you should really not have much bearing on the result. I doubt if they can carry the castle by storm, so their numbers are of little avail to them. They can but starve you, and that one Archbishop could have done as well as two. I suppose you have at least a year's provision now in the vaults?"

"Two years," answered the Black Count, gruffly. "I shall turn out of the castle all but fighting men. Not an extra mouth shall remain within the walls."

"You surely do not intend to turn the Countess Tekla and your own Countess from Thuron?" cried Rodolph in alarm.

Heinrich looked sullenly at him for some moments, and then said:

"No. Neither do I care to be questioned, and, least of all, interfered with. You see how much your precious scheme for informing Baron von Brunfels is worth, therefore be not so forward with advice or comment."

"I beg to call your Lordship's attention to the fact," said Rodolph, with cool firmness, "that my precious scheme has informed you of the odds against you. You may take the knowledge with the petulance of a woman or the courage of a man, as best befits you. A gloomy brow never yet encouraged beleaguered garrison. If you hold off this pair of prelates with their armies for a year or more, then will your name be renowned in song and story wherever brave deeds are valued, and the two Archbishops will become the laughing stock of Christendom. By my good sword, the carvers of the Black Forest shall make wooden figures of them butting their twin heads against Thuron, and the children of the world from now till doomsday will pull a string to see them jump. 'As foolish and as futile as the two Archbishops' will pass into a proverb, or perhaps it will be 'As brave as Heinrich of Thuron.' You have indeed an opportunity which falls to but few, if you meet it with unwrinkled brow."

The Count's countenance had perceptibly cleared while this recital was going on, but he made no direct reply, merely telling the attendants to convey Conrad to a room and see that he was well cared for. Then he asked that Captain Steinmetz be brought before him, and when that ruddy, uncomely officer entered, he said:

"Have you disposed your men along the walls?"

"Yes, my Lord."

"Are any of the Archbishop's troops yet in sight?"

"No, my Lord."

"Send a trusty man to Alken, and tell the dwellers therein that we are to be besieged by the Archbishops of Treves and Cologne. Ask them to spread the news along either bank of the river with these instructions, that all are to make the best terms with the Archbishops they can; to sell their provisions and wine for the most money obtainable, preferring the gold to their Lordships' blessings, if they take my advice. Tell them I shall look out for myself, but that I cannot offer protection to any outside the castle walls; therefore, I shall in future, if victorious, not hold it against any man that he has saved his skin, or his grain, or his wine, by denouncing me. Make all arrangement for the women folk and very old men who are now in the castle. Pay for a year's keep of each of them, and say that if more money is required I shall see they get it. Marshal the non-combatants over the wall and down the ladders as quickly as may be, and if any have friends in the village with whom they prefer to lodge, arrange it to their satisfaction."

"All the women, my Lord?" cried Steinmetz, in astonishment.

"All the women in the castle, with the exception of my wife and my niece, and all the old men incapable of bearing arms."

Steinmetz hesitated, yet seemed incapable of protest.

"Well!" roared the Black Count.

"There will be grumbling among the men, my Lord."

Heinrich brought his huge fist down on the table with a resounding blow.

"Bring me the head of the first man who grumbles. Go and execute your orders, send the women away at once, and they will the sooner make terms with their innkeepers."

Steinmetz departed, and the Black Count strode up and down the room, muttering to himself and scowling like a demon. Rodolph saw he was not in a humour to be remonstrated with, and so said nothing; indeed he understood the military necessity of the apparently harsh measures the Count proposed in deporting from the castle all those who were not necessary to its defence, yet who would likely come to no ill through leaving the fortress. For a long time there was silence in the room, broken only by the Count's measured stride on the oaken floor, in the centre of which Count Bertrich's glove lay pinned with arrows. Rodolph himself was in no pleasant temper, and he looked ahead with some dismay toward imprisonment in a castle which was commanded by so rude and disagreeable a person as the swarthy Count. The archer stood guard at the door, having been set there by the Count's command when Steinmetz's men took their places on the walls. Rodolph wished that he might go to the entrance and talk with the good-natured bowman as an antidote to the gruffness of the Count, whom he found becoming more and more unbearable. There had been moments when he thought the Count might be won over by judicious flattery and soothing compliments, but as he learned more of his temperament he saw that all this had but a transient effect upon him; that, indeed, the Count resented any superior readiness shown by others in conversation, and, in addition, had a nature so suspicious that after having had time to think on what had been said, he became more intractable than ever, evidently coming to the conclusion that the wheedling phrases used to him had been spoken for the purpose of mollifying him and attaining certain ends, all of which he resented.

Presently Rodolph was startled from his reverie by the entrance of the Countess Tekla, accompanied by Hilda, who was weeping. A rich colour mantled the cheeks of the Countess, and it needed no second glance to see that she was in a state of angry indignation. Rodolph, remembering that she expected to civilise her uncle, began to have doubts of her success. Heinrich stopped in his walk when she came in, and glared blackly at her but without speaking.

"Oh, uncle, uncle!" cried Tekla, her voice showing she was nearer tears than the haughty expression of her face indicated, "you surely cannot intend that Hilda and I are to be separated, and that she, a stranger to all here and in Alken, is to be taken to the village?"

"I will have no interference with my orders, Tekla—not from any one."

"But one person more or less can make no difference in the result of the siege. If you think it will, give Hilda and me a single share of food between us, but do not send her away."

The Black Count with almost inarticulate rage at this crossing of his will, beat the table with his fist repeatedly, but seemed unable to speak. He stuttered, with white foam flecking his lips and his black beard. Rodolph edged nearer the Countess, and in a whisper begged her to go away; that unexpected tidings seemed to have for the moment overcome the Count's self-control.

"But they are waiting outside to take Hilda with them. They will seize her unless the order is countermanded," cried the Countess.

"It is war, you fool!" at last roared the Count. "If I have another word from you, huzzy! I shall send you also with your Treves trollop; a fine to-do about a menial like her! And from you, who are the cause of all our trouble."

"You know that is a lie," said Rodolph, quietly.

The Count turned on the young man with an expression like that of a ravenous wolf; his jaw dropped,

showing his white teeth against the jet black of his beard. He seemed about to spring at Rodolph's throat, but his wild eye, wandering to the door, saw the dreaded archer on the alert, watching with absorbed interest the loud-talking group in the centre of the room. His weapon seemed itself on the alert, and there was enough of sanity somewhere in the Count's brain to bid him pause in his projected onslaught. But the fact that he had to check himself added fuel to his anger.

"Get you out of this!" he shrieked; "all of you. I am master of this castle, and none breathes herein but by my permission, man or woman. Whoever questions my authority by word or look, dies. Now, out with you!"

Before any could move Steinmetz strode into the hall, holding by the hair a human head lopped off at the neck, raggedly, the red drops falling on the floor as he walked.

"There, my Lord," he said, holding up the ghastly trophy at arm's length, while he cast a malignant leer at Rodolph, who involuntarily shrank from the hideous object. Even the Black Count himself seemed taken aback by the sudden apparition that confronted him.

"What . . . what is that?" he stammered.

"The head of the first man who grumbled at your command about the women, my Lord. I obeyed your orders and struck off his head."

Rodolph, pale as the dead face, stepped hurriedly between it and the Countess, but not in time to prevent her getting sight of it. She raised a terrified scream that rang to the rafters and covered her eyes with her hands, tottering backwards, while Hilda implored her to withdraw, saying she would go anywhere the Count ordered, and begged her mistress not to cross him. Rodolph sprang quickly to the side of the Countess and supported her. The scream once more aroused the tigerous anger of her uncle. His eyes shot fire as he shouted:

"You did right, Steinmetz, and I am glad there is one man in the castle who obeys the master of it unquestioning. It is war!" and as with increased violence the Black Count roared these words, he smote the grinning head with his gigantic paw and sent it spinning along the floor like a round projectile from a catapult.

"It is not war, it is murder!" wailed the Countess. "There is a curse on this doomed roof, and it shall fall in deserved ruin."

"Hush, hush," whispered Rodolph in her ear. "Bend to the storm; nothing can be done with him now."

"I am going with Hilda; I am going with Hilda. I care not where, so long as it is away from Thuron."

"No, no. Hilda will be safe enough, while you are not, outside those walls. Let me conduct you to your apartments, and I will be surety that you shall see Hilda shortly. For her sake as well as your own, bend to the storm. Don't you see you are dealing with a madman?"

Count Heinrich stood watching them, laughing in short snarling harsh snatches that did indeed resemble the ejaculations of a lunatic, but he made no attempt to interfere with them. Hilda, thoroughly hysterical through fear, leaving her mistress in the care of Rodolph, had flung herself at the feet of the Count, beseeching him to deal with her as he pleased, saying she would go anywhere he ordered her to go, and in the same breath imploring him not to be harsh with her mistress.

"Take her away, Steinmetz," commanded Heinrich, spurning her with his foot. "Send her down to the village."

The Captain, grasping her wrist, jerked her rudely to her feet, pushed past Rodolph and the Countess, dragging the girl out with him. The Countess seemed again about to protest, pausing in her progress, but the young man urged her towards the door, still counselling silence.

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"Shall I pin him to the wall?" whispered the archer, who had been watching the scene with wide open eyes, his fingers twitching for the string, on tension for any sign from his master that might be constructed into permission to launch a shaft. "It seems high time."

"No," said Rodolph, sternly. "Keep true guard where you stand. See nothing, and say nothing."

Man and woman disappeared, leaving the archer murmuring that he wished his master had some courage. The Black Count now alone, except for the silent archer at the door, resumed his walk up and down, first savagely kicking the decapitated head from his path.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A TWO-HANDED SWORD TEACHES DEPORTMENT.

THE archer on guard in the Rittersaal stood with his back to the doorway, bow ready to hand, his mouth pursed as if he were silently whistling, his eyes upraised to the ceiling, seeing nothing and saying nothing, as had been his orders. There was a look of seraphic calm on his face, as if he had never spent a more enjoyable half-hour than that which had just so tumultuously terminated.

In a short time the heavy curtains that concealed the entrance to the room parted, and the Emperor re-entered alone. His face was pale and his lips were tightly drawn. The Count stopped in his walk at the further end of the room, and turned to face the in-comer.

"Well, my Lord," he said, a savage leer of triumph in his red eyes, "you have seen, I hope, who is master of this castle. There have been indications that you supposed I was to be cajoled by flattery into relaxing my authority; but we shall have no more of that, I trust, and there will hereafter be no question regarding whose will is law within these walls."

"On the contrary, Count of Thuron," said Rodolph, with deferential smoothness, "it is that very question I now propose to discuss with you."

"I will have no more discussion," cried the Count, his anger returning. "There shall be nothing but the giving of orders here and the prompt obedience of them."

"Ah, in that I quite follow your Lordship, and have great pleasure for once in agreeing entirely with

the valiant Count of the lower Moselle. Archer, close the doors and bar them."

The archer, a smile coming into his cherubic face, dived behind the hangings and disappeared.

"Hold!" roared the Count. "Stand to your guard, and obey no orders but mine."

There came from behind the curtains the clanking sound of the two heavy oaken leaves clashing together, then the shooting of bolts and the down-coming of the weighty timber bar, capable of standing almost any assault likely to be made against them. Again the rich hangings parted and the archer stood once more before them, his eyes on the ceiling and lips prepared to whistle.

"Do you mean to defy me in my own hall of Thuron?" said the Count, in low, threatening tones, glaring luridly from under his bushy black brows at his opponent.

"Oh, defiance is a cheap commodity, and I have heard much of it since I entered this castle. Of ranting and of shouting I have had enough. I propose now to see what capable action is at the back of all this plenitude of wind."

The wall to the right was covered with many weapons and hung with armour. The Emperor took down a huge two-handed sword, similar to the terrific weapon Beilstein's captain had used so futilely against him at Bruttig. He held it in both hands and seemed to estimate the weight of it, shaking it before him. Then with the point of this sword placed under a similar weapon that hung against the wall, he flipped it from its fastenings and sent it, with ringing clangor, to the floor almost at the feet of the Black Count, who stood with folded arms and face like a thunder cloud, watching the movements of the younger man. He was swordsman enough to know that the very manner in which Rodolph handled the weapon to estimate its weight and balance, proved him an adversary not to be lightly encountered. He made no motion to lift the blade at his feet.

"Is this, then, to be a duel at which no witnesses of mine are present?"

"It is no duel," cried Rodolph, his control over himself for the moment dissolving in the white heat of his continued anger. "It is to be the chastisement of a craven hound. Not a single honourable wound shall I inflict upon you. You shall either kill me, or I will punish you as a cowardly dog is punished. Up with your sword, courageous frightener of women, up with your sword, and let us see what it will do for you."

The archer, breathing hard, had difficulty in fixing his eyes on the ceiling, and in endeavouring to conceal his excitement he began actually to whistle, the infectious refrain, "The devil is black," coming to his lips, and disturbing rather than breaking the silence which followed Rodolph's words. The Count still did not bend his back, but stood there with his arms across his breast. The whistling turned his attention to the door. The Emperor looked round, annoyed at the interruption, whereupon the refrain suddenly ceased, and the bowman's eyes again sought the ceiling.

"I understand," said the Black Count slowly. "It is a most admirable arrangement. When I have you at my mercy your follower there is ready to turn your defeat into a victory by sending shaft through my body; assassination beautifully planned under the guise of fair fight."

"Archer," commanded Rodolph, "unbar again the door and place bow and arrows outside, then fasten bolts once more."

"My Lord," demurred Surrey, "that will arrest attention and lead to interference, which is doubtless what his Darkness desires, for the devil is not only black but treacherous."

"There is truth in that," admitted the Emperor. "Unstring your bow, then, and give it to me."

When the archer had done this with visible reluctance, for he was like a fish out of water deprived of

his lithe instrument, Rodolph, passing the Count, flung the bow into the farther corner of the room, and returned to his place nearer the door.

"Now, my Lord Count," he said, "if you defeat me you can easily keep the unarmed archer away from his weapon. If he calls for help, it will be your own men who answer, for my only other follower lies sorely wounded in your service. If, on the other hand, I defeat you, the archer will have no need of his bow. Is your chivalrous spirit now content? You have, lion-like, out-faced the women, and sent them beaten from your presence; let me see you now stand up to a man, for I swear to you that if I hear another word from those lips until you fight, I will throw knightly weapon aside and assault you with the back of my hand."

The Count, stooping, raised the sword, swung it powerfully this way and that, then whirled it round his head. Unpleased with it, he strode to the wall and took down another and a heavier one. Rodolph stood in an attitude of defence, watching intently every movement of his enemy, turning his body to face him as he walked to the wall and back. The Count was a stalwart man somewhat past the prime of life, so far as active swordsmanship goes. Rodolph having quickly thrown off his doublet, standing in his shirt sleeves, with their lace ruffles at their wrists, seemed no less powerful, and youth gave him an agility which was denied the elder man. But the Count was partly encased in mail, while his rival had no such protection; a disastrous inequality should the opposing sword break through his defence. Europe came later to know Rodolph a master of weapons, as he was of statesmanship, but at this time the Count little anticipated what he was about to face, and had no reason to doubt that he himself was a match for any swordsman in the Empire.

With bull-dog bravery he launched himself upon the young man, swinging his gigantic weapon with an ease and dexterity which, considering the weight of it,

was little short of marvellous. That he had determined to kill, and not to wound, was evident from the first flash of his massive blade. Rodolph, strictly on the defensive, gave way before him inch by inch. Thus the two, their falchions glittering like lightning shafts around their heads, came slowly down the long length of the great room, admirable for such a contest, except for the semi-gloom that pervaded it. There was no sound save the ring of steel on steel. The archer stood with his back against the curtain, his hands on his hips, body inclined towards the combatants, neck craned forward, every muscle tense, almost breathless with the excitement of the moment. His master's back was in alignment with him, and he saw with dismay his almost imperceptible retreat. Through the shimmering of the whirling steel the wild eyes of the Count glared like sparks of fire, filled with relentless hate and a confidence of victory. Sometimes the blades struck a shower of sparks that enveloped the fighters like a sudden glow of flame, illuminating the dark timbers of the ceiling, and drawing scintillations of light from the polished weapons along the wall. Backward and backward came Rodolph, nearer and nearer to the archer, who liked not this slow retreat, and wondered at it; thinking perhaps his master came thus toward him expecting something from him which he had not the wit to understand, but determining to intervene with his bare hands if his master's safety demanded it. Why had he foolishly been deprived of his bow? He thought of stealing to the corner and re-possessioning himself of it, but feared Rodolph's displeasure, so stood rigid and helpless, looking at this contest of the giants, quailing at the inch by inch retreat. No human being could hope to keep up for long that onslaught, yet no sword stroke came through the cool guard of Rodolph. The archer began at length to see with an exultation he could scarcely keep from translating into a victorious shout, that despite the yielding foot by foot his master seemed covered by a roof of steel. Black

Heinrich might as well have rained his blows on the main round towers of his own castle; in fact, he could have done so with more visible effect.

As the clashing tornado of strokes went on without cessation, the archer began to wish he could see the face of his friend and master, but he dared not move from the spot. The Count was quite manifestly beginning to feel the effects of his own fury. His brow was corded and huge beads of sweat rolled down his forehead and dripped into his eyes, interfering with his sight and causing him, now and then, to shake his head savagely, thus momentarily clearing his vision. The same motion scattered the foam gathering at his open lips, and flecked white splotches on his black beard. Rodolph's attitude had been practically unchanged since the contest began, with the ever shifting backward motion, and now as the two neared the entrance end of the long room, the swing of the Count's blade had gradually become automatic as it were, resembling measured strokes regulated by machinery, rather than designed and varied by a sentient human brain. In response to this, Rodolph's defence took on a similar fixity and regularity of movement, and to the onlooker it seemed that the fight might so continue indefinitely, until one or the other dropped from sheer exhaustion.

Suddenly Rodolph stepped swiftly back, whirled his blade round his head with a speed that made it whistle in the air like a gale through a key hole, and, in its sweep from right to left, curving upward, it caught the downward stroke of Heinrich's sword near the hilt with irresistible impact, whirled the weapon out of the Count's hands, and sent it flying to the left wall, from which, ringing against the armour, it fell clattering to the floor. Rodolph, letting the point of his weapon rest at his feet, leaned his arms on the transverse piece, which gave the sword the appearance of a cross, and stood thus regarding his antagonist, who, as if the hilt he had grasped had been the source of his motion, remained in exactly the posture he

held when it was struck out of his hands. He resembled a figure turned suddenly to stone by the sweep of a magician's wand. Leaning forward, his hands outstretched, the one before the other, as if holding an invisible weapon, the spasmodic heaving of his breast was the only motion that agitated his indurate frame. For the first time Rodolph saw in his eyes a lurking flash of fear.

"Take a moment's breathing space, my Lord Count," said the Emperor. "If you exhaust yourself before attack begins how can your defence prosper?" Then turning his head he said, across his shoulder, "Bring the Count his sword, archer."

Surrey saw with jubilation that there was no sign of fatigue on the calm face turned to him, and he had difficulty in smothering a joyous whoop as he picked up the weapon and gave it to Black Heinrich, who, taking it like a man in a dream, backed cautiously to the spot where the fight had begun. It needed no second glance to see that his unexpected disarming had thoroughly demoralised him; yet he made no appeal for mercy, but stood there in sullen obstinacy awaiting the attack which would bring death to him were his antagonist bent on killing him.

"Defend yourself," cried Rodolph, advancing towards him. The other took a firmer grip of his sword hilt and stood ready. The contest was scarcely of a moment's duration. The Emperor struck down his guard several times in succession until Heinrich could have no doubt that he stood entirely at the assailant's mercy whenever he chose to take advantage of a defence that availed nothing; then whirling his weapon several times round his head while Heinrich guarded here and there in doubt where the blow was about to fall, Rodolph dealt the Count a fearful blow on the cheek with the flat of the sword and sent him head over heels with a clatter of armour and the jingling of the liberated sword dancing along the floor. The Count lay where he fell, so dazed that he held his elbow above his head as if that would protect it.

"Get up, you craven dog!" cried the Emperor, the fever of battle unloosing his hitherto suppressed rage. "Get up, you terroriser of women, you executioner of defenceless men. Stand on your feet and don't cringe there like a whipped spaniel."

But the man remained prone and made no motion to help himself. Rodolph raised his sword once or twice and seemed about to strike his fallen foe with the flat of it, but he could not bring himself to hit a helpless enemy, so flinging the blade to the wall where its companion lay, he walked down the room, took up his doublet, and put it on.

For a few moments he paced up and down the room as the Count had done, then seeing Heinrich getting somewhat unsteadily to his feet Rodolph stopped and watched the very gradual uprising. The side of Black Heinrich's face was bruised and swollen, and he rubbed it tenderly with his open hand.

"Now, my Lord Count, if you are ready, we shall conclude this discussion regarding the exercise of authority within this castle."

"Oh, take the castle," cried its owner, dolorously, "and the devil give you good of it."

"I have no wish to deprive you of castle or of anything else. I fought that our lives and liberties may not be at the disposal of a truculent coward."

"I am no coward, my Lord, as you yourself will willingly admit when you are cooler. It is little disgrace to me that I fell before such sword-play as yours, the like of which was never before seen in Germany. If you have no distrust of me, I have no rancour against you for what has happened, and I am content to acknowledge my master when I meet him. What, then, have you to propose to me?"

"I have invited no witnesses to this bout, not because I wished to take unfair advantage, as you suggested, but so that you might not be humiliated before your own men. The archer here will keep a still tongue anent what he has seen. You will bear me out in the promise of that, Surrey?"

"I will not mention it, even to the bow, my Lord."

"Very well. Then, Count Heinrich, you have nothing to fear if you play fairly. Are you honest when you say you will bear no malice?"

"I am honest," said the Count, rubbing his swollen cheek, adding with a grunt, "indeed, I have every reason for wishing you my friend."

"We will take it so. Archer, place the swords where they were against the wall, and take up your bow from the corner. Now I consent that you still exercise full authority in your castle, but we must have no more scenes like that of to-day, where we plead and protest in vain against your barbarous decisions."

"It was a military necessity, my Lord, that forced me to remove all useless persons from a castle about to be besieged. It is always done."

"I quite agree with that, and quarrel with nought but the method of the doing. I will go further and say that your message to the villagers giving them liberty to make the best terms they could for themselves, had in it traces of nobleness that left me entirely unprepared for the madness which followed. To every rule there are exceptions. Are you prepared to order the return of Hilda, the handmaiden of your niece?"

"Such will be my first order on leaving this room."

"You will perhaps promise there are to be no more murders by that cowardly assassin, Steinmetz."

"I shall punish him for what he has done. It was not my intention that any should be beheaded."

"You cannot punish him, richly as he deserves it, for you are the real culprit, giving first the order and then approving the deed when it was done. You promise then, that there shall be no more of such sanguinary commands?"

"I promise."

"The archer will hereafter be my bodyguard, and where I go, he goes. He is to be under no orders but

mine. I shall choose my lodgings in this castle where it best pleases me, and none shall enter therein without my invitation. It may be well to remember, that if it come to such a pass, the archer and myself are prepared to stand out against you and your whole garrison."

"I had hoped that so brave a man as you, would have been willing to accept the word of an equally brave, if less youthful and less skilful, antagonist."

"My confidence in mankind has not undergone improvement during my brief stay at Thuron. Some of your favourites I most thoroughly distrust, Steinmetz for example. It will do no harm if you intimate to him that your severest displeasure will rest on whoever molests us. As for Conrad, when he recovers——"

But this sentence was never finished, and its lack of completion came near to costing Conrad his life, but that was through no fault of Count Heinrich. The conference was interrupted by a vigorous knocking at the closed doors. The Count looked at Rodolph, and it was the latter who ordered the archer to withdraw the bolts and raise the bar. Captain Steinmetz entered, and seemed amazed at finding the door shut against him, but he saw the two men seated at a table as if they were merely in friendly converse together, and so thought no more of the unusual shutting in.

"My Lord," he cried, "the Archbishop's men have entered Alken, coming unexpectedly up the river, instead of from the direction of Cochem. Others have appeared on the heights above the valley by the north tower, and a further body to the south. Foot soldiers are now marching down the left bank towards Alken. A troop of horsemen were the first to enter the village, but now armed men appear in every direction. They are putting up tents on the plains above Alken."

"Has the conductor of the women returned from the village?"

"Yes, my Lord, he is now in the castle, and not a moment too soon."

"He left the women there?"

"Yes, my Lord."

Heinrich turned to Rodolph and said in a low voice:

"I am willing to venture a detachment, to rescue the girl, if such is your wish."

"No, it is too late, and too hazardous. She will probably come to no harm where she is, and a detachment lost would weaken our force so that the castle might be taken in the first rush."

CHAPTER XIX.

A MAN AND A WOMAN MEET BY TORCHLIGHT.

HEINRICH and Rodolph left the grand hall with the archer following at their heels, and ascended to the battlements. The sun had set, and long parallel belts of crimson clouds barred the western sky with glory. The wide valley of the Moselle was filled with a lovely opalescent light, and the river, winding through it, shone like burnished silver. Not a breath of wind stirred the listless flag, and here and there in the encampment slender columns of smoke rose perpendicularly in the air, spreading out like palm trees at the top. White tents had risen as if they had been a sudden crop of mushrooms, and the voices of men came up from among them through the still air. From the village was heard the beat of horses' hoofs, and mounted troopers galloped here and there up and down the darkening valley. On the heights across the Thaurand chasm to the north of the castle, a huge tent was being erected, which Heinrich surmised to be the headquarters of the Archbishops. They had chosen the highest point of land in the neighbourhood with the exception of the spot on which Thuron itself stood; a good coign of vantage, overlooking the Moselle valley in part, and the village of Alken and some of the lower tents, while behind it stretched the level open plain.

"By the gods of our forefathers!" cried the Black Count, drawing down his brow, "I will venture a stone or two at that tent from the north tower catapult before it grows darker."

"Do nothing of the sort," advised Rodolph. "In the first place, it may be well to let the Archbishops

begin the fray in whatever set form they choose. Should the affair come up for arbitrament, that point will be in your favour. You were attacked, and you defended yourself. Then I would waste no stones on an empty tent, for if you strike it, they will but move further afield. I should try the range when their august Lordships are there to bear witness to the accuracy of your aim."

"Oh, very well," said the Count, moodily.

"Nay," continued the Emperor, in kindly tone, placing his hand in friendly manner on the other's shoulder, "I meant what I said merely as a suggestion. Act as pleases you, untrammelled. I seek but to help, and not to hinder you. The utmost I ask is that, if I lodge protest, my protest shall be at least considered. On you rests the defence of the castle, and in that you must be unhampered."

The Count turned quickly and held out his hand, which the Emperor grasped. "Your suggestion was right, and mine was wrong. I want you to stand my friend in this pinch. I have few that wish me well, though perhaps I have as many as I deserve. But I never met a man like you, and I say truly that I would rather meet the two Archbishops with you by my side than have the two with me, and you against me."

"No fighter can ask a higher compliment than that, my Lord Count. We stand or fall together, let the fate of the castle be what it may."

As darkness filled the valley, slowly climbing the hills, whose tops were the last to part with the waning light, numerous camp fires shone in spots of crimson along the river bank. The sound of horses plashing in the water, an occasional snatch of song, with now and then a distant bugle call, echoing against the opposite hills, interfered with the accustomed stillness of the valley.

Rodolph chose for himself and the archer two rooms at the top of the southern tower, one above the other, John Surrey occupying the lower. The narrow stone stair which gave access to both rooms ended at the

circular flat roof of the tower, a platform protected by a machicolated parapet. The flagstaff of the castle rose from the centre of this platform, and over the parapet one had a broad view, which included hill-top and high level plain, for the summit of the south tower was the highest spot in all the Moselle district. From this lofty perch the weak point of the castle was easily recognised. If Thuron was ever to be carried by assault the gate front would probably be the portion to give way.

The builder of the castle had recognised this, and had constructed a gate ridiculously small when contrasted with the great bulk of the castle itself. The entrance was barely wide enough to allow a cart or two horsemen abreast to pass in. The flattened Norman arch above it supported masonry pierced for the cross-bow bolts that might be launched in its defence, and the flat parapet-protected platform over the gate might be covered with warriors, while a huge catapult lay there ready to hurl round stones on whoever attacked the portal. Even if the two stout oaken leaves of the gate, iron bolted, and barred within by heavy timbers, were broken down, the gateway might be held by two expert swordsmen against an outside host. So when the assault was made the souls of many of the besiegers would pass through the gates of Paradise before the bodies of their comrades won their way through the gates of Thuron. Nevertheless, the entrance was the weak point of the castle, for in front of it lay comparatively level ground, while everywhere else the slopes fell steeply from the walls, and the man who attacks up a hill is ever at a disadvantage when he meets the defender who is already on the top. The gate was at the south-western corner of the castle, facing the south. The south tower stood on the eastern face of the fortress twenty yards or less north of the south-eastern corner of the stronghold.

Rodolph came to the conclusion that when the gate was attacked, John Surrey, stationed on the lofty platform of the south tower, with a bundle of arrows

at his side, would give a good account of himself, and make some of the besiegers wish they had been elsewhere.

The Emperor, leaving Surrey in his lofty eyrie, went down the stone steps, and endeavoured to send a message to the Countess that he wished to have a word with her. The wholesale deportation of the servants made the carrying of intelligence about the castle difficult, and he, on personal investigation, found the door to the women's apartments barred. Entering the inner courtyard, which was in darkness, for the moon which had been at the full a week before was now on the wane and had not yet risen, he groped his way until he estimated that the balcony was above him, and there softly cried his lady's name, but without receiving any response. No light shone in any of the windows, and a vague alarm filled his breast, not knowing what the Countess might have done in her despair. That she could have left the castle was hardly possible, for the guard was now most vigilant, yet it might be that she had slipped away when the others were taken to Alken, although, as Rodolph had conducted her from the grand saal to the door of the women's apartments, he had imagined that the women and old men were already gone, the last to depart being Hilda herself, who had been taken to the outer courtyard by Captain Steinmetz after the stormy interview in the great hall. The Emperor left the courtyard and returned with a lighted torch, which he placed in a holder set against the wall on the side opposite to the windows, and this with its sputtering resinous flame illuminated the neglected garden, on which Tekla's horticultural efforts had not yet made visible impression. The light had the effect Rodolph desired. The curtains at the back of the balcony parted, and the Countess, wrapped in a long white robe, looking, Rodolph thought, like an angel, came to the edge of the stone coping. The rays of the torch showed her eyes still wet with tears, but their swimming brightness seemed more beautiful than ever. The young

Emperor caught his breath with delight on seeing the fair vision before and above him, standing out in pure dazzling white against the grim grey walls of the castle. He tried to speak, but could not trust his voice.

"Is it you, my Lord Rodolph?" asked the Countess, in her low, rich voice, peering into the semi-darkness of the garden.

"Yes, Lady Tekla," said the young man, at last finding utterance. "I could not go to rest without having a word with you. Your door was barred and I could get no one to hear me, so I called fire to the aid of my impatience, and set up a torch before your windows."

"We are self-made prisoners. I myself barred the door and paid no heed to the knocking, for I thought it was my uncle returned again. He came once and demanded admittance, which I refused. Then to our amazement he went quietly away, when we fully expected he would batter down the door. My aunt is prostrate with fear of him, and I have but now left her bedside, where she has at last fallen into an exhausted sleep. Oh! why," cried the Countess, raising her arm as if in appeal to a just heaven, "are such uncivilised wretches as the master of Thuron allowed to live and contaminate this fair earth?"

"Well," said Rodolph, with a smile, happily unseen by the girl, who was intensely in earnest, "we must admit that the Archbishops are doing their best to eliminate him. I have often thought that it is only our wonderful self-conceit that leads us to suppose we are actually enlightened beings, and I fear that perhaps future ages may look back on the thirteenth century, and deny to it the proud pre-eminence in civilisation it now so confidently claims. But I have had some conference with your uncle since I last saw you, and I think you will have nothing now to fear from him. There will be no more scenes such as that of this afternoon. He has promised me as much."

"Promised!" cried the girl, indignantly; "I put little faith in his promises."

"There, I think, you do him an injustice. I make no attempt to defend his conduct, but he had most disquieting news brought by Conrad, and——"

"Has Conrad then returned?"

"Yes; a fugitive and sorely wounded. He brought news that the two Archbishops, Treves and Cologne, are leagued against Heinrich of Thuron. This was sufficient to disturb a much less despotic and evil-tempered man than your uncle. He knew that the lines were rapidly closing in upon him, and his ordering of the non-combatants out of the castle, when they might go with no risk to themselves and live safely as humble villagers, was a measure that all custodians of a stronghold threatened with besiegement would have taken, had they been wise. There is no fault to be found with the act as it stands, although his method of carrying it out may lend itself to amendment. And the order was accomplished not a moment too soon, for the fugitives were scarcely in the village before the troops of the Archbishop had taken the place; besides this, Heinrich very nobly counselled none to make resistance but to disclaim all sympathy with the master of Thuron."

"Are the Archbishop's troops now in Alken?"

"In Alken? They are all around us. Not in Alken alone but on the heights to the north, and on the plains to the south. We are completely environed, and, from the round tower above us, a thousand watch fires may be counted in every direction."

"What of Hilda, then, thrust thus among enemies?"

"Hilda is at this moment much safer than you are, my Lady. The Black Count would have sent and brought her back but that he gave the order too late."

"If she is free from harm, I have no complaint to make. You must not think that I protested against her removal through selfishness, or because I was in any way thinking of my own comfort. She has become to me friend as well as servant, and if privations are to be borne within this castle I have no wish to elude my share."

"Hilda is safe in the village and may come and go as she pleases so long as she does not approach the castle, and perhaps even that the Archbishops' troops will allow. They are not warring with women, but with the master of Thuron and his followers. All those who have left the castle are in more prosperous circumstances than we who remain, for should the fighting become desperate and a sack ensue, I should rather have friends of mine out than in."

"Is there danger of the castle being taken?"

"I think the danger is not great, but the Archbishops do not agree with me, otherwise they would not have encircled us. Then chance works strange pranks in situations like ours. The truth is, no one can tell what may happen."

"That is not encouraging, is it?"

"You see I have got into the habit of talking to you just as if you were a fellow campaigner, for you are certainly not the least courageous in this garrison; indeed I doubt if any one else would have had the bravery to face the Count as you have done on more than one occasion. I intended when I came here to-night, to relieve your mind of anxiety regarding Hilda, and forgot that we might need mutual encouragement over our situation. I confess I am rather eager to know what is going to happen, and I wouldn't be anywhere else than where I am for the wealth of the Archbishops themselves. I count much on your uncle, and I think their high and mighty Lordships may wish they had encountered some one else before they are done with him. He is a man of the most headlong courage, as you will see when you know him better, and when you remember that he has probably never been contradicted in his life till we thrust ourselves upon him, I think he is almost amenable to reason."

"Alas, I have not found him so, and my aunt can hardly be looked upon as a favourable example of treatment by a reasonable man. She trembles when his name is mentioned, or when she hears his footstep."

"Nevertheless, I hope you will not give up all efforts toward his reclamation. Believe me, he has sterling qualities that I would were more conspicuous in some of his followers."

The Countess sighed deeply and drew her robe closer about her. The torch had gone out, but the rising moon had begun to silver the top of the round tower. The place was as still and peaceful as if it had been some remote convent garden, far removed from the busy world and its strife.

"It is growing late," said Tekla, "and I must bid you good-night. Your coming has cheered me."

"It gives me delight to hear you say so. May I not come here to-morrow night at the same hour and bring you the latest news?"

"Yes," replied the lady, adding, "again good-night."

Her white form was swallowed up by the dark hangings and the young man climbed the stairs of the tall south tower.

CHAPTER XX.

A BREAKFAST ON THE TOP OF THE SOUTH TOWER.

THE Emperor was awakened by the ringing martial sound of bugles, calling the various camps from slumber. The sun had not yet risen when he reached the platform that formed the roof of his chamber, and there he found John Surrey scanning the military preparations around and below him with undisguised satisfaction. Soldiers in the valley were already falling into line, and the clear stillness of the air made the sharp commands of the officers audible even at the distance where Rodolph and the archer stood. The tall powerful figure of the Black Count could be seen pacing up and down the broad promenade on the west front, which seemed hardly less remote than the valley itself, so lofty was the tower. The whole design of the castle lay beneath them like a raised map.

"I think he has been there all night," said the archer, nodding towards the Count. "I sat here late making arrows in the moonlight, and he was on the battlements when I went down. I was here at day-break, and there he was still. What a lovely scene it is, my Lord, viewed from this perch," he cried, enthusiastically, waving his hand in a semi-circle about him.

"It is indeed," concurred the Emperor. "The placid river, the hill tops touched with the growing light, the green of the dense forest and the yellow of the ripening grain, with the dark cliffs of rock above the polished surface of the deep waters, are well worth getting up early to see."

The archer scratched his head, and an expression of perplexity clouded his brow.

"That was not quite what I meant, my Lord, for although there may be pleasure in viewing hills, fields and river, as my friend, Roger Kent, the poet, often pointed out to me, yet to my mind all such, which we have continually seen these few days back, are little to be compared to the blossoming of the tents on the plain, the stir of marching men eager for the coming to conclusions with their fellows, as men should, and the dealing and receiving of honest blows, doughtily given. Indeed, my Lord, I would rather see one good two-handed sword argument like that between your Lordship and his Darkness yesterday, than all the hills that were ever piled one above the other in Switzerland."

"That contest," said Rodolph, sternly, "is not to be spoken of. You heard me promise the Count that you would keep silence regarding it?"

"Oh, I did not take it to mean that we might not discuss it among ourselves; indeed, it was my intention on the first opportunity to inquire of his Blackness how he felt when he saw you approach like a wind-mill gone mad, with the sword in every place but where he expected it."

"You hold your life lightly to trust it on such a query. You have my strict command to say nothing to him on any subject whatever unless he speak first to you, and then answer briefly and with not too much curiosity."

"I shall cling close to your wish, my Lord, the more as there is little of intelligent talk to be got out of his Blackness at best. These warriors below are like to give us enough to think and speak about. They were early afoot, and got to their work like men who expected to take the castle before breakfast, sack it for mid-day eating, and be home to sup at Treves. I trust we shall keep them with us longer than they think."

The Emperor glanced at the heap of feathered arrows which lay against the parapet partially hidden by a mantle that had been thrown over them. "Has

your arrow-maker proven a success then? You seem to be well supplied."

"He is so far a success as a German can be expected to succeed in a delicate art. The making of an arrow," continued the archer with great complacency, taking a specimen in his hand the better to illustrate his argument, "is not merely one art, but rather the conjunction of several. There is an art in the accurate shaving of the shank with a sharp flint stone; there is an art in the correct pointing of it, and the sloping of its shoulders so that it take not the wind more on the one side of it than on the other, thus deflecting it from the true course; there is an art in the feathering of it, which is in reality the winging of it; the cutting of the notch requires great care, for there it receives its impetus, and the making of the notch I hold to be like the training of a youth, his course in after life depends on it; then it should, when completed, balance on your forefinger, thus, with just so much length to the right and so much to the left. In the making of a perfect arrow there are thirty-four major points to be kept in mind, added to fifty-seven minor details which must in no instance be neglected, the which, beginning with the major points, are as follows, to wit, firstly——"

"We are early afoot, John Surrey, but still too late for the beginning of such a recital. During the siege it is most likely that we may have to spend some sleepless nights on watch, and during these vigils you will tell me all the conditions that go to the constructing of a perfect arrow, for in the still watches I can give that attention to particulars which the importance of the subject demands."

"The suggestion of your Lordship is good, and shows that you have some appreciation of the task's difficulties, the which I have never been able to beat into the head of the German hind the Count has bestowed upon me, although I find him useful in the splitting of wood and the rough shaping of the shaft; indeed he has advanced so surprisingly that he now

sees that a piece of timber, bent and twisted like a hoop from a wine butt, is not suitable for the making of an arrow; that the presence of a straight grain is more desirable than many knots, and so I have a hope that in time he may gather much useful knowledge regarding the arrow-maker's craft. But I would on no account have your Lordship labour under the delusion that the mastering of the major and minor points will guarantee you success in the construction of a shaft. No; you must be born to it as well, because there is an intuition in the estimating of its value when completed; for many of our archers in England, unerring in aim, could not, did their life depend upon it, make for themselves a true flying arrow; indeed the making and the speeding have ever been regarded as separate and distinct accomplishments, expertness in the one being no assurance of expertness in the other; the which is but to be expected in a civilised country, for England must not be confounded with the more barbarous nationalities of the continent; and so in my land the arrow-makers are a guild in themselves, to which trade a man must be duly apprenticed, forswearing in his indentures all vices by which the steadiness of his nerves are affected, as the drinking of strong liquors or the amorous pursuit of——”

“Yes, yes,” cried the Emperor, with scarcely concealed impatience, “all the virtues of earth are concentrated in your land and upon the inhabitants thereof.”

“Nay, I made no such claim,” continued the archer, calmly, “but I may state without suspicion of prejudice in favour of my countrymen that for honesty, bravery, skill, intelligence, modesty, integrity, patriotism, strength, nobility of character, firmness, justice, enlightenment, courage——”

“And a good appetite. John Surrey, have you breakfasted? Do you feed with the men of the castle, or alone?”

“The room below,” said John, in no wise discon-

certed by the sudden change of the subject, and ever ready to discourse on any topic presented to him, "being much too large for my sleeping accommodation, and one never knowing what may happen, especially after such a bout as you had with the master of the place— I beg your worship's pardon, I shall not more particularly refer to it— I might more properly have said, in the circumstances that have come to our private knowledge, I thought it wise to fill the remainder of the space with provisions from the outer courtyard, where they ran some danger of being spoiled by the first rain that falls; and I have also, with much effort and with the help of my arrow-making knave, trundled up these stairs, several of the smaller casks of wine from the same place, the hoisting of the larger butts presenting difficulties we could in no wise overcome. I have furthermore taken the precaution to provide myself with various trenchers, flagons, and the like, and a few stools, for as I have some skill in cookery, picked up in various countries, I thought I might have the privilege of preparing a meal for your Lordship when you were disinclined to venture down these long stairs. I foresaw that such a thing might come as a siege within a siege, and for all such emergencies it is well to be ready, even though they never come. A stout swordsman in a pinch might hold these stairs though a thousand tried to mount them, and when he is tired, a skilful bowman might take his place without danger to any but those below him."

"John, all the compliments you tender your countrymen do I multiply tenfold and bestow on thy resourceful head. Wisdom, thy name is Surrey. Is thy knave in thy room below?"

"Aye. He sleeps, my Lord, that being the greatest of his accomplishments."

"Then waken him; transport table and stools to this platform. Prepare a choice breakfast for four. We will invite the Count himself to breakfast with us, and the two ladies of the castle, if they will so honour

us. Therefore let me boast of thy skill with the viands, John."

"I like not the coming of the Count," said the archer, sturdily. "I did not wish him to know that we were also provisioned for a siege."

"The knowledge should make him the more chary in attacking us, were such his intention. But he has no malignant designs. I trust Count Heinrich."

"You trusted him before," persisted the archer, with the dogged tenacity of his race, "and all that came of it—again craving your pardon—was stout blows and the flying of sparks."

"The Count differs from you, archer, in learning a lesson and profiting by it. No more pardons for such allusions will be granted; three within an hour have exhausted my stock. Attend you to the preparation of the meal; keep strict silence while serving it, and expect generous reward if it prove satisfactory. Leave all dealing with the Count to me, and if you cannot trust his Lordship, trust in Providence."

Saying this, Rodolph went down the stairs, while the archer, grumbling to himself, descended to his room and kicked the slumbering menial into a state of wakefulness that enabled him to appreciate the hard realities of life.

The Emperor, reaching the battlements, greeted the Lord of Thuron, who returned his salutation without lavish excess of cordiality.

"My Lord Count, in honour of the coming of the Archbishops, I am having prepared a breakfast on the top of the southern tower. The archer pretends to some knowledge of cooking, and I ask your Lordship to help me form an estimate of his abilities."

"I shall breakfast on these battlements. I wish to watch the movements of the enemy."

"There is no more admirable point of observation than the top of the tower, for from there you may view what is going on all round you, while from here you may see but towards the west. It is also my intention, with your permission, to invite the ladies, your wife and niece."

Count Heinrich made no reply, his restless eye scouring the plain below.

"I hold it well," continued Rodolph, suavely, "to begin our conflict with peace and harmony within, whatever may happen outside the walls. Have I your Lordship's consent?"

"My whole mind is in the coming fight," said the Black Count, still keeping his eyes on the valley, "and I have little skill in the nice customs and courtesies that perhaps you have been accustomed to. I am a soldier, and prefer to eat with soldiers."

"Am I to understand that you consider me no soldier?"

"You twist my words. I am an awkward man. I mean that I care not for the company of women."

"You owe some reparation to your niece for your harshness of yesterday. It is the least you can do to tell her that you are sorry. I have already said to her on your behalf that your mind was worried by the unexpected news of the junction of the two Archbishops, and although that is no excuse for a grown man, still I think I persuaded her it was. She will, no doubt, forgive you, little as you deserve it."

"Forgive me!" cried the Count, angrily.

"Aye. We all need forgiveness, and I judge you are not so free from blame that your statue will be erected in the valley as the Saint Heinrich of your day. Come, my Lord Count, be a bear to your enemies if you like, but a lamb to your friends, whose scarcity you but last night deplored!"

"The Countess Tekla has refused to see me; she barred my own door against me."

"And quite right too. She is a girl of spirit, and worthy of her warlike ancestors. Therefore, the more proud should you be that she consents to take you by the hand this morning."

"But does she so consent?" asked the Count, dubiously.

"Come to the tower and see. Large minds bear no malice. We will signal to you when the meal is ready."

Rodolph found there was more difficulty in persuading Heinrich's wife to be one at the table with her lord, than there was in winning Tekla's consent, but at last all obstacles were removed and he escorted the ladies up the narrow winding stairs. The Countess Tekla was in unexpectedly high spirits, and she admitted to him gaily that she had been at her wit's end to know what they should do for breakfast, as all attendants had gone, and her uncle had shown no anxiety regarding their substance.

It was Tekla's first visit to the tall tower and she looked upon the marvellous scene spread before her with keen and enthusiastic appreciation. The sun had risen and the morning was already warm, but the skilful Surrey had spread an awning from flag pole to parapet, which shielded the table from its rays. The elder lady seated herself on one of the stools, and paid no attention to the view, awaiting with evident apprehension the coming of her husband. Tekla passed from point to point in the circle of the parapet and exclaimed joyously as the beauties of the landscape unfolded themselves to her. The deep, sombre, densely wooded chasm of the brawling little river Thaurand, from which in three variants, the castle took the several names that designated it, she had never until this moment beheld; the more familiar valley of the Moselle revealed new aspects at this height, not noticeable from the lower level of the battlements. Rodolph accompanied her and pointed out this and that, having himself eyes for nothing but the delighted and delightful girl, and thus, telling the archer to summon the Count, he paid no attention to Surrey's method of doing so, which might not have met his approval. The Count was standing at the edge of the battlements gazing abstractedly down upon the village of Alken, his arms folded across his breast and his back towards the tower. The Bowman deftly notched an arrow on the string and let fly with such precision that its feather must have brushed the Count's ear. The

amazed and startled man automatically smote the air and his ear with his open hand as if a bee had stung him, and sprang several yards from where he had been standing, glaring angrily round, wondering whence the missile had so unexpectedly come.

"My Lord," said the archer, deferentially, leaning over the stone coping and motioning with his bow, "breakfast is ready."

For a moment the Count stood as one transfixed, then a reluctant smile made itself visible through his thick beard, and he strode along the promenade, disappearing down the steps.

A few moments later he was on the platform of the tower, visibly ill at ease. His eyes were on his niece, seemingly in doubt regarding the nature of her reception of him. The girl on hearing his steps had turned away from the parapet, and now stood somewhat rigidly with heightened colour, waiting for him to approach her.

"Tekla," he began, but she quietly interrupted him, saying:

"When you have greeted my aunt, I shall be glad to receive your salutations."

Heinrich was taken aback at this. He had not thought of looking at his wife, but now he glanced at her shrinking form cowering on the stool. He took a step forward, and placed his hand roughly on her shoulder.

"Wife—" he said, and paused, not knowing what to add, until sudden inspiration seemed to come to him, and he cried, masterfully: "We are surrounded by enemies, but we will beat them off, damn them!"

"Yes, my Lord," whispered his spouse, meekly, trembling under his heavy hand. Tekla laughed merrily, and sprang forward to him, flinging her arms about him, to his great embarrassment.

"You great Swartzwald bear!" she cried, "of course you will beat them. I am sure no one can stand up against you."

"Tekla," he protested, with visible discomposure,

"that is the Archbishops' tent on the heights. They can see us."

"Let them!" cried the girl, waving her hands towards the large tent. "This is my uncle, Heinrich of Thuron, surnamed the Black, my Lords and Archbishops, and we hurl defiance at you, for he fears you neither separately nor together."

The Black Count smiled grimly, and very soon they were all seated at breakfast, Rodolph and Tekla bearing the burden of the conversation, the Count and his wife adding but little to it. It was easily seen that Heinrich's mind was not on his meal, but on what was passing in the valley, where his uneasy eye wandered ever and anon.

As the breakfast ended and the Countess Tekla was congratulating the archer on its excellence, there came up to them a fan-fare of trumpets, and all saw, issuing from the forest to the south, an impressive cavalcade, headed by Count Bertrich, at whose side rode another, seemingly his equal in rank, and quite his superior in equipment, whom Rodolph at once recognised by his blazonry as the representative of the Archbishop of Cologne. Behind these two rode a group of perhaps threescore men, all gaily bedecked and fully armed. Five or six horse-lengths in front of this notable procession came four heralds holding long trumpets from which depended gay silken banners in gorgeous colours, setting forth, two the arms of Treves, and two the arms of Cologne. As the cavalcade advanced the trumpeters raised bugles to lips and gave forth the musical notes that had first attracted the attention of those on the tower. The Count sprang instantly to his feet, Rodolph also rising:

"A demand of surrender," said the latter, "about to be set forward with due ceremony and circumstance. I must say the Archbishops acquit themselves creditably."

"Will you attend me while I make reply?" asked the Count, of Rodolph.

"Surely," returned the other.

"I should be glad of your counsel," continued Heinrich, "and of some slight hint regarding the choice of words to be used. We have usually fallen to without so much preliminary flourishing at Thuron, and I am not versed in the etiquette of the occasion."

"Answer slowly," said the Emperor, "taking ample time to consider each question, and if there is any hint to give, I will whisper it to you."

The two men departed down the stairs, leaving at least one interested spectator of the conference about to take place. The elder woman remained where she was, with her hands folded on her lap; the Countess Tekla leaning against the parapet, saw her uncle and Rodolph, attended by Captain Steinmetz and a guard of lancers, mount the platform above the gates, while the imposing troop of horsemen came to halt amidst another blast from the trumpets.

CHAPTER XXI.

AN EXPERIMENT IN DIPLOMACY.

IN loud and sonorous voice Count Bertrich spoke, his words plainly heard by all on the castle walls and even far down the valley.

"Heinrich of Thuron, sometime Count Palatine, now deposed by lawful authority duly proclaimed, you are summoned to surrender the Castle of Thuron at present held by you, to the custody of his High Puissant and Reverend Lordship, Konrad von Hochstaden, Archbishop of Cologne, and his ally, the High Puissant and Reverend Lordship, Arnold von Isenberg, Archbishop of Treves, and in event of such summons not being instantly obeyed, your life is declared forfeit and all within your walls outlaws."

"Ask him," whispered the Emperor, "on what authority this summons is delivered."

"On whose authority do you act?" cried Heinrich, in a voice no less powerful than that of Bertrich.

"His Lordship the Archbishop of Treves is your over-lord, and as such is entitled to make the demand I have set forth."

"Then ask him what the devil Cologne is doing in this business," said Rodolph.

"Why then is the Archbishop of Cologne put first in your proclamation, and by what right does he claim jurisdiction over me?" cried Heinrich.

The two emissaries of Treves and Cologne consulted for a few moments together, and it was quite evident that Count Bertrich had little liking for the turn the colloquy had taken, his haughty nature scorn-
ing lengthened talk with a man whom he considered an inferior, and in any case the sword was with him

a readier weapon than the tongue, as indeed it was with Heinrich himself; but the envoy of Cologne seemed in a measure impressed by the replies of the Lord of Thuron, and appeared to be protesting against what the other was proposing, a backward wave of the hand seeming to betoken a desire to break off negotiations and return whence they came. At last Bertrich again spoke.

"Their High and Mighty Lordships of Cologne and Treves are, as I have said, allies in this quarrel, and they demand your instant answer."

"Say it is impossible for you to recognise Cologne in a matter that concerns you and Treves only. Add that if Treves alone press the demand you will make suitable reply," dictated the Emperor.

"A noble answers only to his own over-lord," shouted Heinrich. "If the Archbishop of Treves make a demand, he shall have my reply, but I stand no question from his Lordship of Cologne, nor can he justly prefer the right to question me except through my over-lord."

"Well spoken," said the Emperor, emphatically, "and good feudal law."

Again a conference ensued between the two envoys, Bertrich first protesting against the decision of his colleague, then reluctantly accepting it. In his anger shearing Arnold of some of his adjectives, Bertrich cried:

"In the name of the Archbishop of Treves, my master and yours, I demand that you surrender to him the castle of Thuron."

"Say that you appeal for justice to the over-lord of all, the Emperor, and offer to surrender your castle when you see his signature to a document demanding it," whispered Rodolph.

Heinrich turned to him in astonishment.

"I fear the Emperor less than I do Treves, and have no intention of surrendering to either. He may have the signature of the Emperor, and then I should be in serious jeopardy."

"He has it not, nor can he obtain it. The Emperor is in Palestine."

The humour of the situation began to appeal to Heinrich. For the first time in his turbulent life he was posing as a respecter of the law and a stickler for forms. The envoy of Cologne sat on his horse awaiting the answer with an expression on his face which showed that he believed the Black Count to be more in the right than he had hitherto suspected, while Bertrich, fuming with impatience and anger, savagely dug spurs into his horse and then reined in the astonished animal with rude brutality when it curvetted under the sting of the steel.

"In a case so serious," cried Heinrich, sternly, "I appeal to the over-lord of the Archbishop, who is my over-lord as well, his Majesty the Emperor. That no injustice may be done, I will deliver up my castle to the Emperor, or, in his absence, to any delegate whom he empowers, the same to show me his credentials signed by his Majesty."

"The Emperor," roared Bertrich, "has already delegated his authority to the Archbishop, who now acts thus under the power granted him. This juggling with words will not serve you. I demand——"

But here he was interrupted by the envoy of Cologne, who seemed surprised when it was alleged that the Emperor had delegated his authority to the Archbishop of Treves. He laid his hand on Bertrich's arm and spoke earnestly with him.

"What comes next?" said Heinrich.

"Oh, the rest is most simple," replied Rodolph. "Bertrich has lied, for there has been no delegating of Imperial authority to his master. Worse than that, he has sown seeds of dissension between the Archbishop of Treves and the haughty Lord of Cologne, and Bertrich has not yet the sense to see it. Tell him you did not know of this bestowal of authority. Ask for the witnesses, if the delegation was verbal, or for a document if he has a written commission from his Majesty."

"But he may have it. How can you say whether he has or no?"

"I tell you the man has lied. Would the Emperor, think you, dare to give to one what he did not give to another? See the surprise on Cologne's face at such an absurd statement. Have no hesitation. He has few qualifications fitting him to be a diplomatist."

"I was not aware," cried Heinrich, stoutly, "that the Emperor had so favoured Treves at the expense of his brother of Cologne. If such is indeed the case, then we need parley no longer. On proof to me of this bestowal of Imperial power on his Lordship of Treves, I will at once surrender my castle to him, leaving the Emperor to adjudicate between us."

Then did the choleric Count indeed justify Rodolph's prophecy. Shaking his sword over his head, Bertrich shouted :

"Surrender the castle, you robber dog, or I will knock it down about your ears, black son of a rooting boar."

The hand of Count Heinrich sprang to the hilt of his blade, and he would have answered angrily in kind, but the Emperor, touching him gently, said :

"Softly, softly. Call our astonished friend of Cologne to witness that you have done everything you could in the way of peace, and the upholding of the feudal law."

Heinrich drew a deep quivering breath into his huge chest, and controlled himself with an effort that made his stalwart frame tremble.

"I ask your colleague," he said, at last, in a voice that was somewhat uncertain, "to bear witness that I have been treated with grave disrespect while endeavouring to yield deference to all above me; the Emperor no less than the Archbishops. I am anxious to abide by the feudal law, and while protecting my own rights, infringe not on the rights of others."

Bertrich gave vent to a cry of disgusted impatience, spurring his horse onward and then round until his back was to the castle. The envoy of Cologne bowed

low to Count Heinrich, although he said nothing, which bow the Black Count handsomely returned. With a blast from the four trumpets, the glittering cavalcade turned, and at slow, dignified pace, as befitted an embassy, left the castle.

Rodolph and Heinrich watched the departure in silence, the latter still struggling with his suppressed emotions, more than half feeling that he had not acquitted himself as a man should, by neglecting to fling back in the teeth of his enemy the contemptuous phrases he had received.

"My Lord Count," said Rodolph, "you have conducted the negotiations most admirably, and I desire to offer you my congratulations."

"I would rather have cut his beggarly throat than bestowed smooth words upon him," muttered the Count.

"There is much that is commendable and even alluring in the project, and doubtless before the sun has set, Bertrich will wish you had, for I do not envy him the meeting with his master. Never was the Archbishop so rascally served. One of two things will happen now, thanks to your diplomacy. The Archbishop of Treves, proud as he is, will be compelled to humble himself before his haughty ally, and declare that Bertrich failed to speak the truth, or the Archbishop of Cologne will gather his men about him and depart down the Rhine to the less picturesque precincts of his famous city. Even if a peace be patched up between them, there will be deep distrust in von Hochstaden's mind against the crafty Isenberg, for, knowing the wily Arnold as he does, Cologne will never believe but his envoy blurted out the truth, in spite of his master's assurance that it is a lie. Believe me, you might have rained blows on Bertrich's back and he would consider the chastisement as nothing compared with the humiliating dilemma in which your words and calmness have placed him."

"The words were not mine, but yours," said Heinrich, much mollified.

"I will not have you say so. I did indeed give you some hints but you clothed them in your own language, and in every case added force to them. It is not flattering to say I did not expect such from you, but I have to admit the truth. Words, my Lord Count, are often more deadly than swords. The man of words who can keep his temper will ever rule the man of the sword. As you acted this morning you might guide an empire."

"And as I acted yesterday, I could not rule my own household," said Heinrich, dryly.

"So far as I am concerned, my Lord, yesterday is dead. I do not remember what happened. I deal only with to-day."

"Lord Rodolph," cried Heinrich, with sudden exultation, "we shall beat these villains yet."

"So the Countess Tekla has prophesied, and so I devoutly believe. In any case this conference has postponed attack for a few days. It will take some time for the Archbishops to adjust their differences, and who knows what may happen later?"

Whether the Countess should prove a true prophet or no remained to be seen, but Rodolph was quickly shown to be a false one.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE FIRST ATTACK ON CASTLE THURON.

IT is doubtful if a nation or a military commander is strengthened by securing an ally, even though that ally be powerful. One determined man will wage war with more success than will a committee that commands a larger force. A general with an ally must be ever thinking of what that ally will do, or will not do. He is hampered at every turn, and must be careful not to take too much glory to himself or show himself a better warrior than the other.

As those within Castle Thuron afterwards discovered, what happened on the morning of the first attack was this. Count Bertrich in his original visit to Thuron and his ignominious departure therefrom, saw with quick military eye, which he allowed no personal feeling to obscure, that the gate, narrow though it was, offered the best means of capturing the stronghold. Once that was battered down, there would be a hot fight in the outer courtyard, then, resistance being overpowered by numbers, the castle belonged to the assaulters. His plan was approved by the Archbishop, who, however, was annoyed to find that his colleague of Cologne desired that Heinrich should be summoned in due form to surrender peacefully before hostilities commenced. To this proposal von Isenberg had to accede, and he did so the more readily as Bertrich assured him that the hot-tempered Count would make some insulting reply which would offend the northern Archbishop when it was reported to him. Although the cautious Arnold was usually most scrupulous in his observance of forms and ceremonies, he had been so angered in this instance, first by the successful flight

of his ward, from under his very roof, and second by the contemptuous defiance of himself by his vassal, Heinrich of Thuron, whom he had always hated, that he was now eager to recover lost prestige, and to accomplish by instant overwhelming force the downfall of the Black Count. He was the less particular in this matter as it never occurred to him that his action might possibly come up for review and judgment by his own nominal over-lord the Emperor, for no Emperor in recent ages had commanded the slightest respect. When it is remembered that twenty-two years before the election of Rodolph, the Archbishop of Treves had captured the capital itself, Frankfort being the place where the election of Emperor was held, and, keeping the Archbishops of Cologne and Mayence outside the gates, proceeded himself to elect an Emperor, while the shut-out electors met under the walls and solemnly elected another, some idea may be formed of the slight influence an Emperor had over his proud and powerful vassals.

It was arranged that the force on the heights to the south of Thuron, concealed in the forest, should be augmented by others from the plain by the river, comprising a company of crossbow men and a troop of lancers, the first to harass the garrison while the gate was being battered down, the second to storm the castle when a breach was made for them. The attack was to be delivered when the embassy had retired after receiving the contumacious reply of Count Heinrich. The assault was to have been led by Count Bertrich and the envoy of Cologne, but when the two had reached the shelter of the forest, Bertrich's colleague refused to take part in the fray, until he had first acquainted his master with the purport of the conference at the gate of Thuron. By this time Count Bertrich felt that he had come badly off in his diplomatic bout with the Black Count, and the knowledge maddened him. He therefore told his ally that Cologne might do as he pleased, but Treves would attack immediately, and the two Archbishops might settle

details after the castle was captured. Bertrich believed that his success in taking the fortress would more than blot out any resentment his master might feel for his failure in diplomacy, as he well knew the state of Arnold von Isenberg's mind regarding Count Heinrich; furthermore, he had not the slightest doubt that with the forces at his command, he would speedily be in possession of Castle Thuron.

So the envoy of the Archbishop of Cologne, attended by his guard, passed through the forest into the ravine of the Thaurand, and thus up to the heights of the Bieldenburg, where the tent of his master was situated.

Rodolph and Heinrich were still standing on the platform above the gate when they saw emerging from the forest a monster closely resembling the dragons which were supposed to infest the Rhine, but from whose baleful presence the Moselle had hitherto been free. Rodolph gazed at its coming with astonishment in his eyes, and the swarthy countenance of the Count seemed almost to blanch, for although that courageous man was not afraid of the Archbishops and their armies, he was in deadly fear of dragons. If their Lordships had invoked the aid of such, then was Thuron indeed doomed. But as the apparition came nearer it proved to be a huge oaken tree, stripped of its bark, advancing, butt foremost, towards the castle. On the underpart all the limbs had been lopped off, but at each side of it the branches remained, stripped of leaves and twigs, sprouting out like the fins of a gigantic fish to right and left. The great tree was borne aloft on the shoulders of more than twoscore men, who were distributed equally on either side of it, and so it advanced slowly, with its white body and gaunt branches, like an enormous centipede. It was evidently the intention of the carriers to throw the tree from their shoulders at the gate, and then taking it by the branches, half a dozen or more at each limb, swing it back and forth, using it as a battering ram to force in the gate. The men carrying this monster

oak had still breath enough left to cheer as they advanced, and Count Bertrich, in the full armour he had worn at the conference, rode by the side of this strange procession encouraging the bearers by word and motion of the sword. From out of the wood, like the first flakes of a snow storm driven by a gale, came bolts from crossbows, the pioneer shafts falling far short of the walls, but gradually coming nearer as the bowmen the better estimated the distance. Bertrich waved his sword at those in the forest, indicating that a closer approach would please him better, and by and by the bolts began to strike against the walls and even fall into the courtyard.

The Black Count, as soon as he was assured that he had to contend with the things of this world only, took on at once the mien of a true commander. He ordered up his catapult men, and two stalwart fellows were speedily at the levers of the engine, working back the flexible arms of timber which acted as motive power for the huge balls of stone. As the bolts from the crossbows began to fall here and there on the walls, Heinrich turned to Rodolph and curtly ordered him to seek another portion of the castle.

"I am very well where I am," answered the Emperor. "I wish to see the result of the attack, and am also anxious to watch your practice with this engine."

The Black Count bent a look upon the younger man that was not pleasant to behold, but before he could speak again the other added hastily :

"I am wrong, my Lord ; I go at once."

"When you have armour on you, I shall be glad of your company," said Heinrich, in a tone less truculent than his glance.

The Emperor, fearing to miss the issue of the fight, did not betake himself to the armoury to fit a suit to his body, but mounted to his eyrie on the south tower, where he found the archer watching the approach of the enemy with great interest. The catapult was at work, but doing no execution. It seemed

impossible to predict where one of the huge pieces of rock it flung would alight ; some went crashing into the forest and perhaps had an influence in frightening the crossbow men, although there was little indication of any such result, for the bolts came as thickly as ever, and were now so truly aimed that they harassed the defenders on the walls. The majority of the granite balls, however, fell to the right of the approaching party and bounded harmlessly down the hill. Meanwhile the men at the levers worked like demons after each shot, and so hard was their labour that others had to take their places after a few rounds. There was no question that if they once succeeded in getting the range, and dropped a few of the boulders on the procession they would speedily demoralise it, but those carrying the tree not only moved forward, but advanced in a zig-zag fashion, that made marksmanship difficult, even had the cumbrous instrument lent itself to accurate aiming, which it did not. The Emperor saw at once that Heinrich should have had several catapults over the gate instead of one, for the interval after each discharge was quite long enough for great advances to be made between shots. Also Heinrich was weak in having no men of the crossbow. This siege had come upon him so suddenly that there had been scant time for the training or arming of crossbow men, and in his marauding expeditions he had never needed them. It was also evident that his men were unaccustomed to catapult work. The castle had never before been attacked, and although the engines had long been part of the equipment of the walls, yet had there been no occasion heretofore to use them. So the Count fought at a grievous disadvantage, and was well aware of the fact, for he worked like a madman, sometimes even handling the levers himself, when a man was injured by the flying bolts, or showed signs of exhaustion. The men themselves, although they worked doggedly under the eyes of the Count, gave no answering cheer when the besiegers shouted their exultation at the erratic work of the

stone-heaver, and the crossbow brigade now issued from the forest, and boldly planted the stakes on which their weapons rested in the open, concentrating their bolts on those who manned the only engine of defence. One valiant crossbow man, panting for distinction under the eye of a leader who was quick to recognise bravery, ran with weapon and stake far ahead of those coming with the battering ram, planted his stake not more than a score of lance lengths from the gate, and began to prepare for a trial at close quarters. This so enraged the Black Count that he seized one of the great spheres of stone, and not waiting to place it in the slow engine, hoisted it up and poising it for one brief second above his head, as he stood on the edge of the parapet, flung it with such accuracy and such tremendous force, that it rolled at great speed towards the man, who turned and fled in terror, leaving his weapon and stake behind him, amidst the jeers of his own comrades, and the first cheer that went up from the garrison.

"Wait till we get the villains under us at the gate, and we will need no catapult," roared Heinrich, in a voice of thunder; and indeed, here was a danger that made the attacking party pause for a moment until urged on again by their intrepid leader.

When Rodolph arrived at the top of the tower, the archer looked up at him with an expression of inquiry, and seemed not too well pleased with his coming. On the ledge of the stone coping, the Emperor saw arrayed with nice precision a dozen arrows, all an equal distance apart. The bow was in Surrey's hand, strung and ready for action, but his jaw dropped on seeing the Emperor, who gazed at the mathematically arranged display on the coping with a smile curling his lip.

"John Surrey," he said, "I trust it was not your intention to molest the Archbishop's troops without command of your superior officer."

"Well, my Lord," replied the archer, in a hesitating tone most unusual with him, "it is difficult

to see so pretty a fight in progress and not do something to the furthering of it. The Archbishop has a hundred bowmen, such as they are, while his Darkness does not appear to have one, if I am not to be allowed to draw string."

"But we have no quarrel with the Archbishop, John."

"Indeed, my Lord," answered Surrey, bitterly, "you forgot that, when you ordered me to bend bow against his two men-at-arms on the hill yonder."

"True, true, so I did, and right well you acquitted yourself. Can you do the same from this height?"

"Can I? My fingers were just getting beyond my control when you came up. No man could wish better shooting than is here to his hand."

"We will wait a little and see if they cannot do better with the catapult. They need some practice, and will never have a finer opportunity."

"Look you, my Lord, at the crossbow shooting. Did you ever see the air so thick and so little damage done? 'Tis a most contemptible instrument, as I have before averred to you, and now you can see its uselessness for yourself. A body of English archers would have had the castle taken and the Count well hanged long ere this."

"I hardly see how archers alone could scale the battlements, however expert they might be; but perhaps they project each other over stone walls attached to their arrows; they do such wonderful things in England."

"I make bold to inform you, my Lord, that——"

"I do not doubt it. Let us watch the fight."

When the cheer went up that greeted the hurling of the stone, and the very precipitate flight of the jeopardised crossbow man, the Emperor turned to the offended and silent archer and said:

"Now is your time, John. Show them what true marksmanship is, and remember the eyes of Germany are on you, or presently will be."

The archer needed no second bidding. Rubbing

his right foot on the roof to make certain against slipping, then standing squarely with feet the correct distance apart, in a position where the arrows laid out were ready to his hand, Surrey, with tightly set lips and wrinkled brow, launched shaft after shaft in marvellously quick succession. The first man at the butt end of the log on the right hand side fell, pierced in the neck downwards through the body. The second man on the same side dropped, then the third, then the fourth, then the fifth. The sixth man jumped, with a yell of terror, to one side, leaving his place, while the remainder not understanding what had happened, straining to uphold their increased burden, at last gave way, and the falling log pinned many of them to the ground.

The archer, the frenzy of killing in his eye, a veritable angel of death on the tower, shouted sharply to the Emperor, as if Rodolph were his menial, "Scatter more arrows on the coping," and his Majesty promptly obeyed.

Into the midst of the now panic-stricken crowd, that a moment before had so proudly borne aloft the oaken tree, Surrey sped his winged messengers, each bringing forth a yell of pain or an expiring groan. Count Bertrich, lashing about him with the flat of his sword, tried to stay the flight of his men, but without avail.

"Roll the log from your comrades, you cowardly dogs, and then fly if you must!" he shouted, but his commands were unheeded.

"Shoot none of those pinned to the ground," cried the Emperor.

"Have you ever seen me shoot a helpless man or horse—except Bertrich's?" cried the insulted archer. "More arrows and less talk."

"Discipline and respect have both gone for the time being," said Rodolph to himself, with a chuckle, as he placed arrows from the pile along the coping. The thought of Bertrich's horse turned the archer's attention to that thoroughly enraged commander.

One arrow glanced from Bertrich's shoulder, and another struck him squarely on the side of the head, shattering itself, but dealing a staggering blow to the Count. Bertrich shook aloft his sword defiantly at the man on the tower, and received a third arrow in his sleeve which came perilously near to be the undoing of him.

"Shoot me that archer on the tower!" he said, to his crossbow men. "Let one bolt at least among the hundreds you have wasted account for itself."

But the order was more easy to give than to obey. The crossbow is not suited to upward firing, for if a man uses a stake, he must lie down to shoot at a height. Surrey, however, turned with an exultant laugh towards those bowmen who had the courage to try conclusions with him, and pinned three to the earth while the others took to flight leaving their cumbrous weapons behind them. A moment later the surviving crossbow men were safe in the forest.

Count Bertrich, to whom the archer again turned his attention, sprang from his horse, paying little heed to the shafts, and, going to the tail end of the log, exerted his great strength, pulling it partly from those nearest him, who, getting up, sorely bruised as they were, lent a hand and rolled the log from the others.

"Stop!" cried the Emperor to the archer, in a tone of voice which left no doubt that authority had returned to its usual habitation.

Surrey paused, and turned a sweat-bedewed face towards his master.

"I am not hurting him," he protested, dolefully, "and it is excellent practice."

"You need no practice, John; and the day is triumphantly yours and yours alone. Never will I believe there lives on this earth a greater bowman, be he English or the devil himself."

"Ah," cried the archer, drawing a long breath of deep satisfaction, "if you could but see Roger Kent. God grant that he is not with yonder crowd on the plain, or some of us will never set foot out of Thuron."

Black Heinrich stood gazing up at the round tower, an unkempt figure, after his great but fruitless exertions. Rodolph waved his hand to him, and leaning over the coping cried :

“How like you our catapult, my Lord?”

“In truth it is amazing. Guard the archer well, and see he does not expose himself. I will burn this clumsy implement and cook our dinners at the fire. 'Tis all it's fit for.”

“Your men are not in practice. Give it another chance.”

When the log was rolling away, many who were under it lay prone on the ground, crushed to death. Count Bertrich approached the gate on foot, his hand upraised, unheeding the catapult which Heinrich kept his men steadily working, saying that if Bertrich did not give in, he would not cease battle, being less chivalrous toward a brave enemy than Rodolph had proved himself.

“My Lord of Thuron,” cried Bertrich, when within hearing distance, “although there is little chance of harm, we know not what accidents may arise, so I beg you to stop your practice, as some of my poor fellows, sorely hurt already, may suffer if I do not formally proclaim our defeat to you. I have no flag of truce with me, and, therefore, ask you to overlook informality, and give me the opportunity of conveying away my dead and wounded.”

“Your request is granted, my Lord,” said Heinrich, telling his men to cease their efforts, “and I hope that to-day's check will not deprive us of the happiness of meeting you again.”

“From what I have seen of your own military skill, my Lord, we might in perfect safety camp within lance length of your gate.”

With which interchange of civilities Bertrich strode back to attend to the removal of those who were injured, while the Black Count, moodily cursing his catapult, said to his men :

“Follow me to the north tower. We shall see if the engine there is no surer than this one.”

As the Count strode away Rodolph joined him, and Heinrich explained half apologetically that he was about to test all the other catapults in the castle.

"I am going to heave a stone into the Archbishop's big tent, if you have no objection," said the Count.

"None in the least," cried the Emperor, "providing the projecting machine is equally willing."

A round stone was put in place, when the levers had done their duty, and Heinrich himself discharged the shot. The formidable projectile described an arc over the profound valley of the Thaurand, struck fairly the western end of the huge tent, and disappeared within it, leaving a ragged hole to attest its passage.

"Ah, that is better," said the Black Count, in a tone of exultant satisfaction.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE TWO ARCHBISHOPS FALL OUT.

THE great white tent erected on the heights of Bieldenburg was in reality much larger than it appeared from the battlement of Thuron. It is doubtful if any who then beheld it, lord or serf, had the slightest conception of its significance. It was actually the precursor of what is perhaps the grandest cathedral the world has ever seen; and when, two years after, Konrad von Hochstaden laid the foundation stone of Cologne Cathedral, it was the designer of this tent who drew the plans for that splendid edifice, which was not to be completed for centuries later.

If the three Archbishops of Cologne, Mayence and Treves, who were also Electors, could have held honestly together, and could have suppressed their jealousy of each other, they might have swayed the destinies of Germany much more surely than they did, for they needed but one more Elector with them to form a majority of the Electoral College, the number of whose members was now fixed at seven, a figure which the Germans were loath to change, because it had come, in this connection, to have almost a mystical significance. Not only had the Electors power to nominate whom they pleased as Emperor, but the College had also the right to depose him, yet the latter privilege was practically nullified by their fear and hatred of each other, so that afterwards an acknowledged fool, Charles IV., who was held in such slight respect that a butcher in Worms had him arrested for not paying his meat bill, so worked on the mutual dislikes of the Electors that he not

only reigned undeposed, in spite of a thousand reasons for being rid of him, but actually arranged matters so that his weak-minded son was elected to succeed him, in spite of the determination heretofore held, that no colour should be given for establishing a precedent that a son might succeed his father on the German throne.

The Rhine, flowing from Mayence to Cologne, seemed to have formed a link between the Archbishops of each place, and they were usually found in alliance with each other, bonded against powerful Treves, whose iron-handed master had defied them both and held them at bay outside the barred gates of Frankfort. The astute Arnold von Isenberg had now resolved to lure the Archbishop of Cologne from the Archbishop of Mayence, and thus Treves and Cologne found themselves in alliance opposite Thuron. What the inducements were is unknown, but as the Archbishop of Cologne two years later began the great Cathedral, and as the Archbishop of Treves four years later began the castle of Stolzenfels on the Rhine, it may be surmised that there were mutual concessions, and that each was reasonably well guaranteed from interference by the other. Stolzenfels stands, as near as may be, midway between Cologne and Mayence, so in fixing a fortress residence for himself and his successors right on the line of communication between his two rivals, it must be admitted that the Archbishop of Treves had a substantial advantage in the bargain. This desertion of his ancient ally must have somewhat surprised the Archbishop of Mayence, for he doubtless remembered that twenty-one years before, Frederick von Isenberg, a relative of the master of Treves, had assassinated on the Cavelsburg, Engelbert von Berg, Archbishop of Cologne, the predecessor of Konrad von Hochstaden, one Archbishop reigning between.

There were also reasons of locality which made an alliance between Cologne and Treves natural. Mayence up the Rhine, Cologne down the Rhine, and

Treves up the Moselle formed the points of a large triangle, and the latter cities being further from the capital than the other, were perhaps freer from fear of whatever influence the Court might possess.

It had long been the ambition of Cologne to build a Cathedral in keeping with the growing ambition of the Archbishopric. Both Mayence and Treves had great Cathedrals. The Cathedral at Mayence had been four times destroyed by fire within the past two centuries and had arisen like an ecclesiastical phoenix in greater splendour after each conflagration. That of Treves had been built on the site of the Roman Basilica, and was said to rival the ancient edifice in size and magnificence. The ill-fated Engelbert took the first steps towards the beginning of a Cathedral in Cologne that would at least equal those of Mayence and Treves, but his assassination ended the scheme for a time. His successor did nothing, and now that Konrad von Hochstaden was Archbishop he was ambitious to link his name with the commencement of an edifice that would eclipse anything then in existence. It was his intention to employ the greatest architects in Germany, and when this determination spread abroad, it caused many artists more or less known to submit plans to him, but none of these met the Archbishop's entire approbation.

There came a man from a small village near Cologne who desired to submit designs for a great church, but being without influence and without wealth he never succeeded in gaining audience with the princely Archbishop. He had no gold with which to bribe attendants and no highly placed friends who could whisper a word for him at the proper moment. Yet he had one friend who believed in him. Father Ambrose, clerical secretary to the Archbishop, was a native of the small and insignificant village of Riehl near Cologne, where the man ambitious to build a Cathedral lived, and Meister Gerard, the architect, was well known to him. Ambrose spoke once or twice to Konrad regarding this man, but the Archbishop was

then busy with the secret envoys from Treves, and while war is being concocted, churches must stand in abeyance. When these secret negotiations were completed, Father Ambrose again attempted to bespeak a hearing for his fellow-townsmen. The Archbishop, however, was not then in the architectural mood, and Ambrose feared his request had been inopportune.

"You are a good man, Ambrose," said the Archbishop, "but persistent. Now let me tell you finally what my purpose is. It is not a village church I wish to see builded, but a Cathedral that will outshine Imperial Rome herself. Therefore it is not a village architect I am on the outlook for, but one who will prove the modern brother of the builder of the Parthenon in Athens."

"I know not who built the Parthenon, my Lord," said the monk, with the dogged pertinacity of the North German, "but it may have been a village architect, despised by the great of Greece."

"It may indeed be so. Whence comes this architect of yours?"

"From Riehl, my Lord."

"From Riehl, indeed! You might at least have given us a town the size of Bonn. From Riehl!" The Archbishop threw back his head and laughed.

"Can any good come out of Nazareth,' quoth they of old," said the monk, solemnly. The Archbishop became instantly serious.

"Ambrose, that smacks strongly of the sacrilegious."

"I may put it thus then—'A prophet is not without honour but in his own country, and among his own kin, and in his own house,'" said the monk, giving the quotation in Latin.

"You think much of this man?"

"I do indeed, my Lord."

"Then I will give him a commission, but it shall not be the building of a Cathedral. I have made compact with my brother of Treves, Arnold von Isenberg, too long estranged from me. We are more like to find ourselves engaged in tearing down than in build-

ing up. Let your architect then design for me a large tent, one that will hold a hundred men while seated at dinner, or five hundred, with tables removed, to hear Mass. Let the tent be well proportioned, for in that lies architectural skill. Its ornamentation will give little scope to a dull man and much to one who is ingenious. Draw what money is needed from the Treasury for its construction, and see that the sum be ample, so that your architect may have fair recompense, and that I may not be ashamed of my tent, for within it shall the Archbishop of Treves meet me in conference. Have the tent made ready as soon as possible, for I know not the day I may need it, and in the building of it let your fellow remember that the beauty of a tent is that it bears transportation well, being not over bulky, and that it is erected quickly and stands firmly in a storm."

Thus came the large tent, made in Cologne, to be placed on the heights of Bieldenburg over the Moselle, with Meister Gerard himself superintending its erection.

The floor had been constructed of flattened timber, bedded in the cement used for the building of castles, which when hardened was more difficult to break than the stones it bound together. Over this was laid Eastern cloths, soft in touch to the foot, and pleasing in colour to the eye. When the tent was erected, Meister Gerard waited eagerly until the sun rose next morning, so that he might persuade Ambrose to ask the Archbishop's criticism of the work now completed that he might thus obtain an opportunity to speak with the great ecclesiastic, on whom the architect felt his future depended. Gerard saw the envoys depart on their mission to the castle, and, early as it was, he also saw Konrad von Hochstaden, the monk Ambrose by his side, walking to and fro before the Archbishop's residential tent. The great audience pavilion stood alone, one end facing the east, as any erection intended for the use of two Princes of the Church should stand. To the north of it was the cluster of tents occupied

by Konrad and the numerous attendants who waited upon him. To the south was a similar village belonging to the Archbishop of Treves, each village being at the point nearest the city from which its master took his title. The trumpets were blaring before Castle Thuron when Ambrose induced the Archbishop to inspect the new tent. He stood within it and gazed about him, while the architect, near by, waited for a word of approval or condemnation.

"You have given us no ornamentation," said Konrad at last.

"The ornamentation, my Lord, is largely in its correct proportion; nevertheless, I have ventured on a touch of colour which may be seen, or not, at your Lordship's pleasure."

"Let us behold it, then."

The architect gave a signal to two workmen who waited at the western end of the tent, and they, by the pulling of cords, rolled up an inner screen. There was disclosed a picture wrought in many coloured silks, deftly sewn together, representing the arms of Cologne and Treves in juxtaposition. The light shone through the scheme of colour from the outside, and the richness of the painting stood out with the more distinctness that the whole interior of the tent was of one subdued hue of white.

"That is most ingenious," the Archbishop was pleased to say, to the architect's gratification. "We will have it remain so."

"I have another picture on the eastern end as well," said Gerard. "Have I your Lordship's permission to exhibit that also?"

"Surely, surely," answered Konrad, whereupon the two workmen walked the length of the tent, and rolled up another screen similar to the first.

The result was most startling. The morning sun shone fully upon the eastern end of the tent and imparted a glory to the rich colouring, which gave the picture a brilliancy savouring more of Heaven than of earth. The design represented a twin spired

Cathedral, worked out in the fullest detail, the spires encrusted with ornament, the beautiful Gothic door between them being a model of correct proportion, yet of immense size, the whole representation one on which the eye rested with ever increasing delight, wonder, and admiration.

For some moments the Archbishop stood speechless before this marvel in line and tint. At last he said:

"It is not possible that such a building actually exists and I have never heard of it! Where is it?"

"Only in my brain, my Lord, but it may exist in Cologne, if your Lordship so wills it."

"Ah!" The Archbishop drew a long sigh of supreme gratification. "Are you sure you sold not your soul to the devil for this design, Meister Gerard?"

"I had hoped your Lordship would attribute the design to a higher source. It was my belief that inspiration prompted the picture which made me so persistent in trying to obtain permission from your Lordship to exhibit to you the drawings. There will be no Cathedral like that of Cologne in all the rest of the world, if this building is erected."

"You speak truly. Let down the curtain, and see that it is securely fastened. The design cannot be seen from without, can it? I did not notice it as I entered."

"No, my Lord, unless at night when the tent is lighted, and then only when the curtain is raised."

"This curtain is not to be raised. No one must look upon this picture. Have a new end made for this tent, and put in a drawing of Treves Cathedral if you like, but this is to be seen by none. Meister Gerard, you are the architect of Cologne Cathedral. He is to have a room in the palace, Ambrose, and a fitting allowance: see to it. As soon as another end is in place, get you back to Cologne and work upon your plans. Men less inspired will attend to the fighting."

Therefore was the stay of Meister Gerard, architect of Cologne Cathedral, of short duration in the neighbourhood of the Moselle.

The Archbishop was still in the tent when his envoy returned from the mission to Castle Thuron, and reported there to his master the colloquy that had taken place between Count Heinrich and Bertrich. Konrad von Hochstaden frowned as he listened, and for a time pondered deeply in silence over the information he had received. The architect and the workmen were gone, and Archbishop, envoy and monk were alone in the tent.

"You say that Count Bertrich attacked the castle as you departed. Are any of my men in the fray?"

"No, my Lord. I urged Count Bertrich to postpone assault until you were made acquainted with the result of our conference at the gate, but this he refused to do. I then ordered your captain to hold aloof until he got direct command from you."

"You did well. This Bertrich seems to act much on his own responsibility; a hot-headed man, whom perhaps his master employs for that very reason; if successful, the Archbishop may commend, and if unsuccessful, disclaim. Is there a chance of capturing the castle through his onslaught?"

"I could form no opinion thereon, not knowing how rigorously the place may be defended."

"I must have some explanation from Arnold von Isenberg before the question is decided. Ambrose, deliver greetings from me to the Archbishop of Treves, and acquaint him with the fact that I await him here, as there are matters of grave import to discuss."

The monk departed, and presently the Archbishop of Treves entered the tent attended only by his secretary. After salutations had passed between the two Princes, Konrad von Hochstaden began the discussion, going directly to the heart of the matter, as was his fashion, for he never imitated the round-about method of approaching a subject that so much commended itself to his more subtle colleague.

"I am informed that Count Bertrich has attacked the castle, and is at present engaged in its reduction,

and this without waiting for co-operation from my forces."

"If he has done so," replied Arnold suavely, "he has most gravely outrun his instructions."

"He furthermore stated to the Count of Thuron that you had certain powers granted you by the Emperor Rodolph. What is the nature of those powers?"

"In that also is Count Bertrich wrong. I have never so much as seen the Emperor Rodolph."

"You may, nevertheless, have had communication with him."

"I have had no communication with him."

"It seems strange that such a claim should have been put forward on your behalf by your own envoy."

"I cannot account for it. Bertrich has not yet returned, but when he does, I shall ask him for an explanation, and that in your presence. He is a turbulent man, and a good fighter, but difficult to restrain. One has to work with the tools that come to one's hands, and often the service is ill-rendered, as seems to have been the case in this instance."

As the Archbishop ceased speaking there arose cheer after cheer from Castle Thuron, which caused all present to listen intently, and for a short time nothing further was said. It was his Lordship of Cologne who first broke silence.

"Those cries are too near at hand to betoken victory for Count Bertrich. Perhaps it may be well to send him reinforcements."

"No," said Treves. "This action has been begun without my sanction, and Bertrich must conduct it as best he can. He has the demerit of being over-confident, and a check, while not affecting the final result, may make him the easier to reason with, and prevent the recurrence of such hasty unauthorised action."

"You take it coolly. I confess I would learn with some impatience that my troops were being overborne, and my first impulse would be to send assistance."

“Your action would be natural and creditable to you, but there is more at stake than the issue of a *mêlée*. I find myself unexpectedly put on the defensive, and have no reply to make beyond giving you my simple word. I know no more than you do what has happened, and have had, as yet, no account of the parley with the occupier of Thuron. It is necessary there should be complete confidence between you and me, and I regret that in the very beginning of our united action, suspicion should be engendered in your mind. If Bertrich captures Thuron, he mistakes me much if he thinks that the bringing thither of the Black Count will compensate for the shadow he has cast on my good faith with you. Therefore I propose to await his coming, and I shall be most gratified to have you question him before he has had word with me, either in my presence, or in my absence, as best pleases you.”

The candour of Arnold von Isenberg made an evident impression on his suspicious colleague, who said after a pause :

“Yes, there must be confidence or our united action will be futile. There are our arms, side by side, on the end of this tent, facing the stronghold which we expect to reduce. Our several motives should be as plainly in sight to each other, which is my excuse for speaking thus openly to you, rather than cherishing secret distrust.”

The sentence was strangely interrupted. The cheering had for some time ceased, and now through the arms of Treves, blazoned on the wall, there came, with a sound of tearing cloth, the huge round stone shot from the catapult. It fell with a resounding crash on the floor and rolled between the two Electors, who both started back with dismay on their faces. The silk and canvas hung in tatters, and showed beyond a bit of the blue and peaceful sky. The Archbishop of Cologne devoutly crossed himself, but his comrade of Treves looked alternately at the rent, and at the great missile that caused it, like one stupefied.

"If I believed in portents," said the Archbishop of Cologne in the uncertain voice of one who did so believe, "that might have seemed an unlucky omen."

The Lord of Treves, recovering himself, shrugged his shoulders.

"It is but a chance shot, and the rending of a bit of painted cloth. I shall send flag of truce to Heinrich and ask him to deal us no more of these pleasant surprises. If he refuses, then must our encampment be removed further from the castle, while we shall place some catapults here and return his favours to him, so I have little doubt he will consent to leave us unmolested."

As he finished speaking there entered to them Count Bertrich, his face flushed with anger, but his demeanour in a measure crestfallen. He bowed to each Prince of the Church, and stood there silent, wincing under the lowering indignant gaze bestowed on him by his imperious master.

CHAPTER XXIV.

COUNT BERTRICH EXPLAINS HIS FAILURE.

THE two Archbishops looked at one another as if each waited for his colleague to begin.

"Will you question Count Bertrich, my Lord?" said Treves, at last.

"No. He has represented you, and should account to you. As I have your permission to note his replies, I shall put question when I have heard what he has to say, if further examination seems necessary."

"You went on a diplomatic mission," began Treves, very slowly to his follower; "am I correct in surmising that you return from a battle?"

"Yes, my Lord."

"Is it true that you began this attack notwithstanding the protest of my ally's representative?"

"It is, my Lord."

"In pursuance of instructions previously given by me?"

"No, my Lord; I had no instructions from you to offer battle, but I knew it was your intention to fight, if Heinrich refused to surrender. He did so refuse, and I took it upon myself to begin."

"What was the outcome?"

"I was defeated, my Lord."

"Have you lost any men?"

"Something over a dozen, and under a score. They were killed by the archer I told you of, just on the point of victory. We would have had the castle otherwise."

"You return, then, a defeated man, having insulted your master's ally by refusing to listen to his counsel, your followers are slain, and you admit having acted

without orders. What have you to say in excuse, Count Bertrich?"

"There is nothing to say. I stand here to take the brunt of my acts, and to endure what punishment is inflicted upon me. A fighting man makes mistakes, and must bear the issue of them."

"Yet, what I have chronicled is not the most serious of your offences. It seems hardly credible that you should have said such a thing, but I am told you boasted to Heinrich that the Emperor had bestowed certain authority on me. Made you any such statement, and if so, what explanation have you to offer?"

"I out-lied the villain, that was all?"

"To whom do you refer when you speak of the villain?"

"To the black thief of Thuron. Perhaps I should have admitted two villains, myself being the other. He said that he would surrender the castle if you had authority from the Emperor. I knew he was lying, and would surrender to none, so I said you had such authority."

"What grounds had you for making such statement?"

"No grounds whatever, my Lord. It was merely a case of two liars meeting, one on horseback, the other on the walls of Thuron."

Notwithstanding the seriousness of the occasion, a slight smile disturbed the severe lips of the questioner, and a more kindly light came into his eyes. He was shrewd enough to see that the blunt and prompt outspokenness of the Count served his purpose better than the answers of a more diplomatic man would have done. There was never a moment's pause between question and reply, nor was there any evidence on the part of Bertrich of an endeavour to discover what his master wished him to say. Any sign of an understanding between the two, any hesitation on Bertrich's part in answering, might have added to the apprehensions of Konrad von Hochstaden. But the dullest could not help seeing that here stood a brave

unscrupulous man who knew he had done wrong, yet who was not afraid to take upon himself all the consequences, attempting little excuse for his conduct. The Lord of Treves turned to the Lord of Cologne. "Have you any question to ask?" he said.

"Not one. I have nothing to say except to beg of you not to visit any resentment you may feel upon Count Bertrich, who is a brave soldier, if an unskillful liar. Indeed I am not sure but the Count has done us both a service in bringing to an issue this matter, which, to our detriment, might have dragged on longer than would have been convenient. The Black Count seems to possess some skill in diplomacy, which I did not give him credit for, and it was probably his intention to keep us parleying with him until he was better prepared to receive us. All that now remains for us to do is to plan a comprehensive attack on the castle with our whole force, which will be immediately successful. Your archer can do little when confronted by an army, for, as I understand it, there is but one archer in the castle. Then we will take the Black Count and the other prisoners with us to Treves in a few days, and there pass judgment upon him, for I think it better that such trial should take place under your jurisdiction than under mine, Heinrich being your vassal, and he seems to show a preference for having all transactions done in strict accordance with the feudal law, which is but just and proper. He may then appeal to the Emperor—if he can find his wandering Majesty."

"I entirely agree with your argument," replied Treves; and turning to Count Bertrich, he continued, "In deference to what has been urged on your behalf by his Lordship of Cologne, I shall say nothing further in regard to your conduct, beyond breathing a fervent hope that you will not so offend again. Take or send a flag of truce to Thuron gates, and ask the Black Count to respect this camp. Tell him that if he will not so arrange, he will merely put us to the trouble of moving back our tents, and placing catapults here

instead. If he molest us not, we shall take no offensive measures against him from this quarter. This piece of rock has just been hurled from the castle through the tent, and it came dangerously near being the death of some of us."

"By the gods, then," cried Count Bertrich, "Heinrich has greatly improved his catapult practice in very short time."

"We have no desire to be his targets, so make the arrangement with him if you can."

"My Lord, if I may venture the suggestion, it were better to have no further traffic with the Black Count, for I doubt if he will keep his word, even if he gave it. But besides that, this is the only point from which a catapult can be of service against the castle. Placed here, half-a-dozen engines, energetically worked, might fill his courtyard for him. I strongly urge you to remove the tents and fix catapults in their places."

"Count Bertrich," said Arnold, harshly, gazing coldly upon him, "this morning's excursion has led you into delusions not yet cleared away, I fear. This campaign is to be conducted by the Archbishop of Cologne and myself. We desire no suggestions from you, but very prompt obedience. You have heard the order, transmit it to one of your officers, for I distrust your own powers as faithful envoy. When he reports the result of his conversation with Count Heinrich to you, you will then, perhaps, be good enough to bring the tidings to me."

Count Bertrich reddened angrily, kept silence, bowed to the two dignitaries and withdrew.

"Nevertheless," he muttered to himself as he strode away, "it is folly to waste the best point of attack for the convenience of two Archbishops. Heinrich is no such fool as not to jump at such a senseless proposal."

CHAPTER XXV.

THE SECOND ASSAULT ON THE CASTLE.

THE swarthy Heinrich, summoned once again by bugle blast to the gate top of the castle, seeing there a man with white flag, heard with amazement that the high and honourable Archbishops did not wish to be incommoded by his catapult practice and the incoming inconvenience of the lumps of stone, and were, therefore, willing themselves to forego the bombarding of the castle from that point, if he would promise not to fling rounded granite again into the deliberations of the mighty Lords aforesaid. Heinrich, casting a glance over his shoulder at the heights of Bieldenburg, scarcely believing that men pretending knowledge of war and siege would so easily forego so great an opportunity as the heights afforded them for the annoyance of the castle, not to mention the destruction which might be caused by the falling of stone on the roofs inside the walls, readily gave his consent to put the catapult of the north tower out of action—a promise which he duly kept in the letter, if not quite in the spirit, as will be seen when this history has somewhat farther extended itself.

So great, however, was his distrust of humanity in general, and the Archbishops in particular, that he did not remove his catapult from the north tower to some part of the battlements where it could make its influence felt on the invaders, but kept it there idle, expecting that their Lordships would, when they came to realise the advantages of the situation, forthwith break their word, which, it is pleasant to record, they never did. The incident of the white flag and its mission encouraged Heinrich mightily, for small as

was his respect for his assailants before, it was less now. They might easily have shifted their tents farther back, while he could not remove the castle, nor eliminate the Bieldenburg, and thus they possessed a notable natural advantage over him which they had recklessly bargained away, getting practically nothing in exchange. The Black Count walked up and down gleefully rubbing his hands together, communing with himself, for he was not a man to run and share his satisfaction with another. This was but the first day of the siege, yet he had enjoyed a victory in diplomacy, a victory in battle and a victory in bargaining, and in pluming himself thereon he quite overlooked the fact, as mankind is prone to do, that in none of the three cases was the merit due to himself, but to the actions of others.

There were to be no more pleasant breakfasts on the top of the south tower, it being within the range of possibility that a crossbow bolt might find its way thither, so the two ladies of the castle could not be permitted to run the chance of such an eventuality. Heinrich, however, beginning at that late day to show some human interest in his family, arranged that they should eat together in the great hall. Here he took the head of the table, with his wife and Tekla on one side, while Rodolph occupied a seat on the other. The archer had proved himself no less expert with cooking utensils than with the bow, and on the promise of an extra penny a day, willingly prepared their meals, which were carried in by two men-at-arms, who proved, at first, clumsy waiters compared with the neat and deft-handed Hilda. These meals, however, were anything but cheerful functions, for the Count and his wife rarely broke silence, and although some conversation passed between Rodolph and Tekla, it was overshadowed by the continual gloom that sat on the brow of their taciturn host.

Watch was set for the night, as evening fell once more upon the valley, and again the hundreds of camp fires glowed in the darkness, while up from the

tented plain, in the still air, came the singing of familiar songs, deep throated bass mingling with soprano and tenor, the harmony mellowed by distance, sounding sweet in the ears of the beleaguered. The songs for the most part were those the Crusade had brought forth, and the words, while often warlike, even more frequently told of Christ and his influence on the world. They were the songs which had stirred the sentiment of the nation and had caused so many to go forth to battle for the rescue of the true sepulchre from infidel hands. Militant marching tunes mingled with other sadder strains which mourned the non-return of friends from the Death Plains of the crimson East.

In the morning the circling army was early astir, displaying an energy not less remarkable than it had exhibited on the previous day. It was evident that an attack of some kind was contemplated, and those within the castle had not long to wait before the design was disclosed. A line of men, probably numbering a thousand, was drawn up at the foot of the hill extending between the village of Alken and the castle, from the north of the Thaurand valley far towards the west. The warriors stood about, or sat down, or sprawled at full length on the ground, as suited each soldier's fancy, and apparently waited the word of command which their officers, standing on the alert, would give when some signal was shown or sounded. The few sentinels on watch along the eastern wall of the castle gave warning that a like company of men was crawling up the steep slopes of the Thaurand through the forest, but little heed was given to them, as the eastern sides of the castle were so high that no man could easily win to the top with any ladder the besiegers might construct, and if they attempted such scaling, the guards at the top would have no difficulty in dislodging the ladders with their pikes and lances. The line near Alken rested out of reach of catapult-stones, but in a measure only. Although the catapult which Heinrich at once set in operation, could not

hurl a stone directly on their line, yet the balls of granite rolled down the hill with irresistible force, and while the men were inclined at first to hail these missiles with shouts of merriment, dancing this way and that to avoid them, several standing with legs wide-spread allowing the projectiles to pass between their feet, yet now and then a hurling stone would take an unexpected leap in the air and double up a man, whose laughter was heard no more. After some moments of eruptive activity on the part of the castle the soldiers were compelled to treat the efforts of the enemy with respect, while the officers moved their men in extended order, so decreasing the danger from the catapults.

Presently there emerged from the forest, in front of the gate, twoscore or more of men in complete armour. They advanced to the great oaken log which had proved so disastrous to their comrades the day before. Crossbow bolts now flew again from the wood, but a wholesome fear of the archer on the tower kept the bowmen from showing themselves. The men in armour with some difficulty lifted the heavy log to their shoulders, and as they advanced towards the gate, Surrey's arrows glancing ineffectually from their protected bodies, a bugle call rang out over the valley. Instantly the men at the bottom of the hill gave a great cheer and charged up the slope, treading down the vines, while others behind them carried scaling ladders of a length suitable for the long low front of Thuron. Those at the catapults now worked like madmen, and their efforts told heavily on the advancing army, whose movement, laborious because of the steepness of the hill, the feet of the men entangled in the tenacious, trailing vines, was once or twice checked in the ascent, but they always rallied with a cheer, under the encouragement of their officers, and set their faces to the task before them with renewed energy.

The archer on the tower desisted from his fruitless efforts against the men in armour, and now turned his

attention to the unprotected horde climbing the hill, and although every arrow did execution, the stormers were in such multitude that his skill had no effect in checking the advance.

The Black Count strode from catapult to catapult, alternately cursing and encouraging the workers. Rodolph, now in full armour, commanded a body of men who stood on the battlements with axes on their shoulders, ready to spring forward when ladders were planted. The twoscore with their battering ram threw down their bulky burden at the gate, and endeavoured to put it to its use, but it was soon evident they could not hold the position they had won. Besides, they were unaccustomed to the weight and awkwardness of armour and made little headway with their battery. Their heads being enclosed in iron—for if they had shown an inch of their faces the archer would certainly not have turned discouraged from them—prevented their hearing the words of command, and they seemed incapable of swinging the log with rhythmic motion. Count Bertrich, on his horse, his visor up in spite of the archer, roared orders that were not obeyed, because unheard, and in his frenzy the Count seemed about to ride down his own followers, while loudly cursing their clumsy stupidity. But worse than this was the rain of stones which even armour could not withstand. The Black Count, summoning his most stalwart followers, hurled down on the men beneath them the huge granite spheres, acting for the time as their own catapults. The machine itself did better execution than it had accomplished the day before, as its workers had now learned its peculiarities. The oak log gave infrequent feeble blows against the strong gate, but one after another of its carriers were felled by the stones, then the log itself proved too heavy for its thinned supporters, and so came to the ground, whereupon those who remained turned and fled for shelter in the forest, all of them sweating in the unaccustomed iron cases in which they found themselves: some falling prone on the ground

through heat and exhaustion, not knowing how to unloose their headpieces to get a breath of fresh air.

Bertrich wasted no further effort on them, but called his crossbow brigade out of the wood to advance and harass those on the walls while the scaling ladders were being put into use. They came out timorously with an eye on the tower rather than on the direction of their bolts. Here, at last, was Surrey's opportunity. His hatred of a crossbow man as a cumberer of the earth lent strength to his aim, and his anger at being baffled by those in armour made the game he was now playing doubly enjoyable. He raised a Saxon yell, heard far and wide over hill and dale.

"Oh, here you are at last!" he cried. "Come along with your ox-bows and hay ricks."

When half-a-dozen had fallen under the whizzing, almost invisible, shafts that so quickly succeeded each other, the ranks of the crossbow men wavered and broke, every man of them getting under cover as speedily as he could.

Those on the western wall under Rodolph's command were now having all they could do. The hill climbers, although somewhat out of breath with their hurried ascent, swarmed in such numbers at the foot of the walls, that for a time their repulse seemed almost hopeless. Each of the attacking soldiers carried, wound round his waist, a rope tied at one end to a piece of timber three or four feet long. This billet of wood they flung over the parapet, dragging instantly on the attached rope. Sometimes the billet came down on them again, but more often it caught and held in the machicolations of the parapet, and then the soldier, setting his feet against the stone wall, climbed nimbly up the rope, usually to get knocked on the head with a battle-axe when he appeared at the top, but while many went thus down again, others obtained a precarious footing and fought fiercely until they fell backwards over the parapet.

Rodolph saw that the moment three or four of the

enemy made good their stand at any one part of the wall, their comrades would swarm up at that point and the castle would be taken, for the besiegers were so numerous they might speedily overpower the little garrison. He gave the word to cut the ropes whether the ascending man got foothold or not. The defenders, in the fury of the battle, were paying more attention to the splitting of skulls than the destroying of the means of ascent, often leaving a rope dangling where another than its original owner might come up. After this command the battle-axes clove each rope at its junction with the wooden billet, and so destroyed its usefulness, for there was no time in the mêlée to retie the cord to other billets, even if other billets were to hand. When at last the ladders came, the fight waxed more fierce. Here Rodolph took pattern by the Black Count, and gave command to the defenders to hold catapult stones in readiness and wait till two or three men were following each other up a ladder, then hurl granite on the foremost, who in his fall brought down his comrades with him. In each case when this was accomplished the men on the walls were instructed to rush forward, pull up the ladder and throw it inside the courtyard. In this way most of the ladders had been taken before the attacking force rightly estimated their loss, or indeed noticed it in the exciting conflict which was going forward, and with each capture the danger to the castle grew less. Black Heinrich looked grimly on, taking little part in the defence now that the attack on the gate had been abandoned, but once when, in spite of all efforts of the defenders, four ladders had been placed simultaneously together and half-a-dozen men succeeded in mounting the battlements, the Count sprang forward and grasping one after another of the invaders, flung them, head over heels, through the air in such quick succession, and with such incredible force, that most of them rolled well nigh into the village of Alken before they came to rest on the hillside. The raiders gradually became discouraged, but

were buoyed up by the hope that other points of attack might be more favoured by fate than theirs, else the retreat would have sounded from the bugle. But suddenly a riderless horse came galloping round a corner from the gate, and the officers recognised the animal from its trappings. Like wildfire spread the rumour, "Count Bertrich is slain," then all heart departed from the attack, and a wild exultant cheer rose from those in the castle. The retreat down the hill became a panic-stricken flight, which the catapults, now in activity again, accelerated.

"Show your white flag!" roared Heinrich, striding up and down the battlements, intoxicated with his triumph, and waving hands above his head like a madman. "Show your white flag; you surely were not foolish enough to attack without it."

The white flag presently did appear coming up from Alken, and the request was made that they be allowed to bear away their dead and wounded. Then at last the active engines ceased and the tired men sat on beams and parapet, drawing sleeves across their sweating brows.

The foot of the walls presented an appalling spectacle. There was a windrow of dead and wounded, as if the poor wrecked human beings had been some sort of wingless moths who had flung themselves against these adamant walls, and had paid the last penalty of their rashness. Parts of broken ladders lay mingled with the slain, together with the round lumps of stone which had been their undoing.

"Is it true that Count Bertrich has been slain?" asked Rodolph of Heinrich, when the latter had assumed his customary calm.

"I know nothing of it. Here is the archer who was on the tower; he may be able to tell us."

"Indeed," said Surrey, "I fear it is not true, for I had no fair shot at him. It was not my intention to have killed him so early in the game, but he must needs insult me, so I let fly at him."

"How did he insult you?"

“He raved at the cautious crossbow men, telling them that if they did not come out from the wood they were cowards. Now it is not fair to call a man a coward who fears my bow, and that expression I took as an insult. He is a wise man and not a coward who betakes himself to the wood when my arrows are abroad.”

“I can bear witness to the truth of that,” said the Black Count.

“I therefore loosed arrow at his slanderous mouth, but he turned his face just at the moment, and although I unhorsed him and he lay still enough till they dragged him away, I have my doubts regarding his death.”

During all the rest of that stirring day soldiers were busy carrying their dead and wounded comrades down the steep hill to the village, and the white flag flew until darkness blotted it out.

CHAPTER XXVI.

AN ILLUMINATED NIGHT ATTACK ON THURON.

ON the following morning there were no signs of activity in the camp, as the sentries on the castle walls gazed about them in the early dawn.

Heinrich thought that after a defeat so overwhelming the Archbishops would strike tent and hie themselves back to their respective cities, there to resume the religious duties which had been interrupted by the martial bugle blast, but Rodolph laboured under no such delusion. He said the defeat made a prolonged siege inevitable; that the feudal lords could not afford to turn their backs upon a vassal who had thus repulsed them, or their prestige in the land would be gone forever. And it was soon evident that, although there was no activity in the camp, neither was there any sign of departure. It was learned from those who came to make further search for the missing, that Count Bertrich lay grievously ill of his wound, and if he recovered there would be another scar on his already unattractive face, but hope was held that he might live, as he was being tenderly cared for in his own tent next to that of the Archbishop of Treves himself. Rodolph acquainted the archer with the condition of his high-born foe, and Surrey received the news with subdued dejection.

"I had no fair chance," he said, sadly. "A man on a prancing horse is ever a difficult mark, but when he is encased in armour with only his face showing, and then unexpectedly turns his head just as arrow leaves string, death, however merited, can hardly be looked for."

The archer spent most of his time on the tower

top, industriously making arrows, and attended assiduously by his menial, who had conceived a strong attachment to him, chiefly through the medium of vigorous kicks and blows which John somewhat lavishly bestowed, hoping thus, as he said, to make a man of him.

"You may have another opportunity of giving Count Bertrich a taste of your skill," said Rodolph, "for I doubt if the siege is yet near its conclusion. Indeed that we still hold the castle is due most of all to you."

"We hold the castle through the mercy of Providence alone," said the archer, gloomily, uninfluenced by his master's praise.

"Through that of course," remarked Rodolph, "but also in a measure through our own hard blows and your accurate marksmanship."

"I am saying nothing against the valour of the garrison, my Lord. What I mean is, that if Providence had led my friend Roger Kent into the camp of the enemy, as I supposed was probable, there would have been little use of our longer holding out, for he could have stood in Alken or even further away and picked us off one by one as pleased him. No man would dare show face above parapet. I would rather undertake to conquer Thuron with Roger Kent alone than with all the army of the Archbishops."

"Let us be thankful therefore that he is elsewhere. You think then he is not with the Archbishop?"

"He has probably forgotten all about my going to Treves," replied the archer, sorrowfully. "Roger is an absent-minded man, and a dreamer. He is likely sitting on the bank of some stream, poetry making and watching the drying of the papyrus he fabricates, for unless hunger overcame him he would never think of accepting service with any, or of drawing bow. It was his hope that some good peasant would take charge of him, and feed him, allowing him to exchange poetry for what provender and lodging he had, but he has never found such, for he wants a hut in a pic-

turesque spot, by a lake or near a waterfall, with hills or mountains round about, where he may make papyrus and poetry."

"What is the nature of this papyrus he manufactures, and what is its purpose?" asked the Emperor.

"He says the Egyptians produced it in ancient times. He macerates certain reeds and grasses together between two stones, in flowing water, and when he has compounded a substance like porridge, he spreads it thinly on a flat stone which lies in the sun. It dries very white, and is of light texture, like cloth, only more easily torn, and will last you a long time if kept dry, but in water it dissolves again. He has thus lost much good poetry, through lying in trenches during heavy rains, the which causes him to dislike campaigns where the tents are few. On his papyrus he indites with a sharp stylus his poems, and for safe keeping places the sheets under his doublet when he sleeps; but he rises, after a rainy night, encased in pulp, which he takes from various parts of his apparel with tender care, attempting to dry the same again in the sun. He tells me that even when successful in drying the substance, the poetry is gone. Thus does he yearn for a warm hut of his own, or any one's for that matter, who will let him use it. But there is small chance of a peasant taking him up; few of them care for poetry, and he never can save the money he earns; he was always a fool in that respect, differing greatly from me; he gives away his money to the first beggar that comes with a pitiful story."

"I like your friend Roger from what you tell me of him, and if I ever come near to him, God granting he has not bow in hand, I shall be pleased to furnish him the hut he craves, if we can find one with stream and waterfall in conjunction."

"What! and thus rob Germany of the finest archer that ever bent yew wood? Indeed, it is my hope that he shall find no such patron, but that we may both take service under one commander, fighting side by side in future battles, or perhaps instructing others in

the use of the long bow, and thus raising a company that will be of use in German warfare!"

As day by day passed without motion in the camp, it came to be believed in the castle that no further attack was contemplated until Bertrich had so far recovered as to lead it. He alone knew the conformation of the fortress, as he alone had been inside Thuron, so it was probable that his knowledge was regarded by the Archbishop as necessary to an attacking force.

The nights were now moonless, and although watch was strictly kept, the first intimation the garrison had of renewed hostilities was the resounding crash of the battering ram against the closed gate. The Black Count was instantly on the rampart above the gate with his stone heavers, launching out huge boulders into the darkness, and calling in his stentorian voice for torches, which seemed slow in coming. These lighted brands were flung down on the besiegers, to be trampled out by them at once, while the stone throwers, taking advantage of the momentary gleams of light, thundered down granite on the heads of the enemy. The gate did not yield as speedily as the assaulters expected, and they, not knowing it was barricaded behind by tons of grain in sacks, redoubled their efforts to gain quick entrance, for they were unarmoured, and knew their existence depended on a sudden forcing of the portal.

Rodolph, leaving the defence of the gate entirely to the Black Count, summoned his men to the long west battlement, fearing an attack there with the ladders, for he could not conceal from himself the fact that had the day attack been more intelligently conducted, with a concentration of forces at any one point along the lengthy wall, it would have come perilously near to success. He ordered a lavish supply of unlit torches, which he placed in position along the outer edge of the parapet, for their only hope lay in having plenty of light to deal successfully with an onslaught. To light the torches prematurely would be to lay the defenders open to a flight of bolts from crossbows,

were a brigade of bowmen in attendance, as was extremely probable.

Shortly after the first sounds of battering at the gate aroused the citadel, the attack on the west front began. The besiegers apparently had not come up the hill as before, but swarmed round the corner of the castle from the level ground opposite the entrance, and at first Rodolph thought the assault on the gate had been abandoned and the attacking party had come to try their fortunes against the comparatively low wall, which it was his duty to protect, but the blows of oak on oak still resounded, and now he saw he was face to face with a general attack similar to the one they had formerly repulsed in daylight, the enemy doubtless hoping to profit by the darkness, and perhaps thinking to take the garrison by surprise.

In spite of his eagerness and anxiety, the Emperor could not help pausing for a moment to note the unexpected transformation which took place in the valley and on all the hillsides round about. As soon as the cheers from Thuron gave evidence that the attack was known and had been met, a line of fire seemed to encircle the castle far below and up the hills. Thousands of torches were lit, and the cheers of their holders caused Rodolph to expect an instant onslaught by the entire strength of the Archbishops. This, however, was not the intention, for those bearing the torches marched and counter-marched in apparently aimless fashion, weaving a thousand threads of fire into a glowing web that dazzled the eyes of the onlookers, while cheer after cheer rent the air, as if to encourage the actual besiegers.

The amazing illumination had at first the effect intended. It bewildered those who had to face it, while the assailants, with their backs to the scintillating brilliancy, were helped rather than disturbed by the universal glow, which faintly illumined the grey walls before them. Rodolph had his torches lighted as rapidly as possible, for he knew that light was absolutely necessary to a successful defence, and the long

train of flaming, smoking torches, which were here and there beaten down by the ends of ladders, suggested an expedient to him. He had ample help, for the whole force of the castle was now aroused, so he ordered up his reserves to carry wood and build two bonfires, one at each end of the stone terrace. With these roaring to the sky, the two great towers of Thuron stood out in crimson relief, seeming to hang in the air, resting on nothing, for their bases were hid in the darkness below. Before the fires blazed out, however, several of the enemy had obtained footing on the terrace, and fierce hand to hand fights were going on, the climbers for the most part getting the worst of it, for even when a man secures his footing on solid stone instead of ladder-round, he is scarcely on equality with his foe who has had to expend no exertion, merely waiting there until a head appears.

When the two fires shot up to the sky the desultory cheering in the valley gave place to one mighty simultaneous shout of triumph, while torches were enthusiastically flung in the air. They were quite palpably under the delusion that the castle had been carried and was already burning. The fierce yell which came from Thuron was an answer they had not expected, and now, as being of no further use, the torches below were extinguished as rapidly as they had been lighted. The great castle was self-illuminated and must have presented a spectacle well worth viewing from the plain below, as it stood out against the dark sky like a glowing fortress of molten stone. With the sudden access of light, the attack on the gate had proved no more practicable than on the two previous occasions. The archer on the tower again cut down the unprotected men, and again the attacking party fled panic stricken to the forest or round to the west front, where matters were going little better for their comrades.

The besiegers, with a lively remembrance of their former repulse along the same wall, became disheartened when they found themselves fighting in a light

as strong as that of day. They knew if they did not scale the walls before the garrison became fully alive to what was taking place, they would have no further chance after they were discovered. Again they saw their ladders pulled up when those who climbed them had been crushed by stones, shattered with battle-axe, or flung backwards by a lighted torch being thrust in their faces, and now they saw the ladders thrown on the fires to blaze up and illumine their discomfiture.

Yet the fight while it lasted had been fiercer than during the previous attack, and three of Count Heinrich's men had been slain.

In spite of the victory, which wrought up the Black Count to a pitch of frenzy, during which he paraded the long terrace between the two fires, shaking a battle-axe above his head, and roaring defiance to the enemy, Rodolph saw that if these attacks were continued the castle must inevitably fall, for the Archbishops had more than a hundred men to Heinrich's one, and the loss of two or three of the garrison on each occasion would soon leave the castle without defenders. For the greater part of the night the Emperor paced the walls, keeping watch with the regular guard. The fires burned out, and as dawn approached he still walked up and down with his cloak drawn round him, pondering on the extraordinary situation, and wondering how it would end. He felt that he was the Emperor in name only, as indeed many of his predecessors had been without complaining, so long as they had money to spend and good wine to drink. Here was war of the most sanguinary nature raging in the centre of his dominion, his subjects not arrayed against a foreign foe, but mercilessly slaughtering each other, and if the Emperor cried "Stop," not even the most humble of the men-at-arms would heed the command. How to remedy this amazing state of affairs he had not the least idea. If he proclaimed himself to Heinrich that noble would, as like as not, clap him into the deepest dungeon of Castle Thuron, and look about to see what profit might be made of his notable

prisoner. Should he approach the Archbishops, a similar fate would probably await him. He would have given much for an hour's conversation with Baron von Brunfels, or even for the opportunity of letting his friend know where he was, but either chance was alike impossible, girt round as he was by hostile troops. The hill tops were lightening with coming dawn when Rodolph sought his room in the south tower, and lay down wrapped in his cloak to a troubled rest, his great problem still unsolved by his night's vigil.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE TWO YEARS' SIEGE BEGINS.

WHAT the Emperor feared the Archbishops would do, and what would have been the proper thing to do from a military standpoint, was what the warlike prelates did not do. Both were appalled at the loss of life which had accompanied their efforts to capture Thuron. It is not to be supposed that a man whose ambition it was to link his name with the building of the greatest cathedral the world had yet seen, relished the outlook which promised instead to give him the reputation of a Hannibal or an Alexander, and that, too, without the compensating fame of a great conqueror, for the Archbishop of Cologne saw that even if the castle were captured, the feat would add few laurels to the brow of a commander at the head of a comparatively overwhelming force. He felt he had been tricked by his smooth-spoken colleague, who had persuaded him that the mere appearance of this imposing body of men before the walls of Thuron would in a manner cause them to imitate the walls of Jericho. In this suspicion, however, he wronged his brother of Treves, who had not intentionally misled him, but had actually hoped to prevent bloodshed by employing a force so palpably irresistible that Heinrich would at once come to terms. Arnold von Isenberg had no particular objection to the shedding of blood, and had before now held down his enemies with a strong hand, but results in this instance had been out of all proportion to their cost. He had been led, more than he himself cared to admit, by the impetuosity of his fiery follower, Count Bertrich, who now lay raving with the fever resulting from his wound. As Arnold

advanced in years he was more prone to depend on diplomacy for his victories than on actual force, but he liked to have the force in the background even if he did not care to use it.

There was a stormy scene between the two dignitaries on the morning after the failure of the night attack. The dormant suspicions of von Hochstaden were again roused. The assurance that the siege would be a bloodless one had been so quickly belied, that he now saw in Bertrich's first impetuous attack a determination to drag the forces of Cologne into a struggle which Treves shrank from meeting alone, and now the apparently frank answers of the culprit, which at the time had satisfied him, seemed but the deeper villainy, as having been probably rehearsed beforehand. Thus the Archbishop of Cologne saw himself the easy dupe of his crafty co-elect, from whose latent methods he had more than once suffered, and whose cunning he had always feared.

"You have deceived me," he cried angrily, when they were in the conference tent alone together, saving only the presence of their two secretaries.

"I do not like your word 'deceived,'" replied von Isenberg, who remained as calm as the other was agitated, "unless you apply it to me as well. I have deceived you, perhaps, but I was myself deceived. If you accuse me of miscalculation, I am willing to admit the truth of the charge."

"You knew the character of this man Heinrich; I did not. You said we had but to sit down before the castle, and it was ours. That was not true."

"I have already admitted that I was mistaken," said Arnold, quietly.

"You can do nothing but admit it," cried von Hochstaden, hotly; "the facts disclaim all denial. What I hold is that you knew this before we came, and have drawn me into a quarrel which is none of mine; that you have forced on the fighting so that we are now apparently committed to a course of which I entirely disapprove."

"I assure you I did not expect to be compelled to fight."

"That I do not believe."

"My Lord, you are too angry now to discuss this question as it should be discussed. You are overwrought, and naturally, at the loss of so many of your men."

"I would not give the life of one Rhine man for all the castles on the Moselle!" exclaimed von Hochstaden, impetuously.

"I was about to add that I, too, am deeply grieved that your men have fallen, and also that so many of my own have been killed. I think it right then that we postpone further discussion until we can approach this grave situation with minds free from the emotions which now make reasoning difficult. Are you willing that we leave decision until to-morrow?"

"With all my heart. Our talk cannot bring back to life the meanest of our following. To-morrow you will be unembarrassed by any suggestions from me."

"Why, my Lord?"

"Because the moment I leave this tent I shall give orders to my captains to gather my men, when we shall together journey to Cologne."

"Do you hold such determination to be fair to me?"

"Have you been fair to me? You have deceived me from the first."

"Twice you have said that, my Lord, and for the second time I give you my earnest assurance that such is not the case. I counsel you as a friend not to make the charge the third time."

"Do you threaten me?"

"Have you not threatened me with your desertion? If you say you do not intend to withdraw, then we will lay plans together at a future time."

"I am determined to return to Cologne."

"To begin your cathedral?"

"'Tis of more avail than dashing out the brains of my soldiers against a Moselle rock."

"Let me give you good advice in the rearing of it. Build your cathedral like a fortress. You will need a stronghold presently in Cologne, whether you need a church or not."

"From threatening my person you threaten my city."

"Frankly, I do," replied the Archbishop of Treves, without raising his voice. "You have hitherto been in some measure the ally of Mayence. I cannot remember the time when I feared you combined, but it suited me to separate you. I have done so. I learn that our brother of Mayence is both enraged and trembling. If you leave Thuron I shall instantly propose alliance with him, who now thoroughly distrusts you, and he will gladly join me, for I have never pretended to be his friend, and he has ever feared me as an enemy. Why did I propose alliance with you?"

"For your own purposes, as I now know too well."

"Surely. But what suggested the thought that such an alliance might be accepted by you? You cannot guess? Well, I will inform you. Because your ally of Mayence sent secret emissaries to me proposing an alliance with him. I saw there were differences between you, and instantly resolved to make an ally of the stronger. Therefore my envoys went to you, while his were dealing with me in Treves. When my men returned with your consent I told the envoys from Mayence, with much regret, you had made the first proposal to me, and that although I had sent to you begging to be released from our compact, you had refused."

"Which was a lie."

"Say rather a whole series of them, my Lord, or call it diplomacy if you wish to speak politely; but meanwhile do not neglect my advice to build your cathedral in the form of a fortress, and make it a strong one."

"How can you expect me to trust you after such a cynical confession?"

"I do not expect you to trust me. I have dealt

with strict honesty towards you from the moment we joined together, yet you have displayed distrust since the first day. I do not in the least object to that. But as I cannot have the advantage of confidence I shall turn to the advantage of perfect frankness. I shall keep to the letter the bargain I have made with you. You shall keep to the letter the bargain you have made with me."

"You mean, then, to attempt to stop my withdrawal?"

"No. You may withdraw to-morrow if you wish to do so, and my men will form line and salute you as you pass. Then I shall divide my forces into groups and attack Thuron night and day until there is not a man left to defend it. That will not take many days, and it will give time for my brother of Mayence to meet my victorious army at the junction of the Rhine and the Moselle, when we will journey amicably together to make some inquiries regarding the progress of your cathedral at Cologne."

Konrad von Hochstaden walked the length of the tent several times with knit brows, turning in his mind the problem that confronted him. Arnold sat on the bench beside the long table which divided them, his face impassive and inscrutable. Never during their colloquy had he raised his voice to a higher key than was necessary to make it distinctly heard. The two monks sat apart, downcast and silent, helpless spectators of a quarrel which might have the most momentous consequences.

At last von Hochstaden stopped in his walk, and stood regarding his ally with bewildered indecision stamped on his countenance. He had spoken heretofore in tones alternately tremulous with deep emotion and quavering with the anger he had tried in vain to suppress.

"I cannot stand here," he said, "and see my men uselessly slaughtered."

"With your humanity I am in complete sympathy. It is no pleasure to me to have soldiers killed, although

sometimes the killing is necessary. Were I alone I would, as I have said, throw force after force against Castle Thuron until it succumbed, but I am acting with you and eager to come to an understanding that will be satisfactory to you ; but you have made no proposal, only a threat of withdrawal. Now if it is your wish to take the castle without risking the life of another of your followers, I stand ready to make such arrangement."

"Can such arrangement be made?"

"Without doubt. We have come so suddenly on Count Heinrich that he has had no opportunity of provisioning his stronghold. The peasants tell my men that he has taken in nothing that will enable him to withstand a prolonged siege. We can therefore environ him so closely that in a comparatively short time hunger will compel him to sue for terms. This may consume days, but not the lives of men. I stand ready to agree to such a proposal willingly ; in truth I will agree to anything you suggest, short of your own desertion, or of requiring me to retire defeated before the Black Man of Thuron."

"How long, think you, will the siege last?"

"There is the castle ; there are our men. You can answer your question as well as I. How many men has Heinrich within his fortress? I do not know. What I do know is, that if no more grain enters the castle, the supply therein will, in time, be consumed, and then grim famine allies itself with the two Archbishops—a foe that cannot be fought with bow or battle-axe. If we resolve to starve him out, then I shall proclaim to my men that I will hang any who shortens the life of one of his. There will thus be no more bloodshed, for he dare not sally forth to attack us, and we will keep bow-shot distance from him. The conditions of the game are all before us ; you can form a conclusion as well as I, and if you prove in the wrong, I shall not accuse you of cozening me."

The Archbishop of Cologne stood with clouded brow, arms folded across his breast, ruminating on

what had been said by the other, who watched him keenly from under his shaggy eyebrows. At last von Hochstaden spoke, with the sigh of a man out-generalled.

"I do not wish to spend the remainder of my days sitting before Thuron."

"Nor do I. The plan of starving them out is yours, not mine. At least it is my proposal as an alternative that may please you. With your co-operation, I would fling force after force against Thuron, and so reduce it."

"No, no!" cried the Lord of Cologne, "no more bloodshed. We have had enough of that."

"Very well; therefore I modify my desires to meet yours. You may withdraw as many of your men as are not necessary, retire yourself to Cologne, and set them, with suitable prayers, to the building of your cathedral. I will send an equal number of mine to Treves, and with what remains of our united forces we will surround that thieving scoundrel with an impregnable band of iron. All that I insist on is that the flags of Cologne and Treves continue to fly together on this tent, and that we encircle the castle with our allied troops."

"Have it as you wish," cried Konrad, sorrowfully. "I defer to your opinion."

"Not so, my Lord," said von Isenberg. "It is I who give way to you. But from this moment the plan is mine as well as yours, and I shall loyally adhere to our agreement, come good or ill out of it."

Thus began the celebrated investure of Thuron Castle, which lasted two years, until famine did indeed spread its black wings over the fortress, while during that time, historians tell us, the besiegers merrily drank one thousand gallons of good Moselle wine each day.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE SECOND ARCHER ANNOUNCES HIMSELF.

THE first problem which the Archbishops set themselves to solve was the estimating of the exact number of men required to surround the castle effectually, and keep watch night and day, with proper reliefs. The cordon was drawn closer round the castle. The axemen hewed an avenue through the forest in straight lines, so that no point should be out of sight of two or more men who constantly paraded these woodland lanes. The village itself was completely cut off from Thuron, and the living line extended between the castle and the brook Thaurand, so as to make the getting of water impossible, the besiegers not knowing the castle itself possessed an inexhaustible well, and that all within were thus free from the dreadful danger of thirst. A group of tents was placed at the river end of the stoned-in passage that descended from the castle to the Moselle. The besieging line of men ran up the deep valley of the Thaurand, and so across the steep hill through the forest, and down again into the valley of the river, where the links of the living chain joined the line that extended south from the village. The guards were a few yards apart, and the orders concerning their watch were as strict as skilled officers could make them, for the Archbishop of Treves had commanded that a net with meshes so minute that not the smallest fish could penetrate, should be drawn round the doomed castle, and each officer knew that neglect would be punished with ruthless severity. The tents instead of being grouped together were placed along the outside of this line, so that no guardsman need have far to travel to his rest, nor any excuse to loiter in coming to his

watch. A circle of fires surrounded the castle at night, serving the double purpose of giving light for seeing and heat for cooking.

Those in the castle witnessed the tightening of the line around them, and at first thought a new attack was meditated, but as time went on and no attack was delivered, the true state of affairs began to dawn upon them. The Emperor was amazed to find so little military skill or pluck in the opposition camp, but he welcomed the change from activity to quiescence. He supposed the Archbishops must know how well provisioned the castle was, for it had been filled in the eye of all the country, and he had heard Heinrich's order to the peasantry to save themselves by giving any information they chose to the invaders; he was also cognizant of the fact that the Black Count had ruled his district with a hand by no means of the gentlest, so it never occurred to him that the besiegers had got little news from the people.

The archer, perhaps, would have rested more contented had he been permitted to try his skill at long distance bowmanship on the environing soldiery, but the Emperor thought it best to let sleeping dogs lie, and bestowed positive instructions upon John Surrey to wing no shaft unless he saw a determined advance on the part of the enemy. The archer was most anxious to show how much superior his light instrument was to the cumbrous catapult, which admittedly could not carry so far as the ring around the castle, and he pleaded with Rodolph to be allowed to dispatch, say, half a dozen shafts a day, by way of preventing the coming of weariness upon the opposing camp. Nothing, he held, was so demoralising to an army as a feeling of absolute security; and if there was to be no sallying out against the Archbishops, those within the castle owed it to the foe, if only from the dictates of common humanity, to allow a few arrows to descend from tower to tent each day. Rodolph, however, was proof against all arguments the archer could bring to bear upon him, and John

frequently sighed, and even murmured to himself a wish that he had taken service with the irascible Heinrich rather than with so peaceably minded a man as Rodolph.

He consoled himself by sitting in the sun on the top of the southern tower, with his back against the parapet, busily employed in the making of arrows, the huge pile beside him bearing witness to his tireless industry, while many more were stored in his room below, and to the safe custody of this apartment he took down his day's manufacture each evening, where they might become seasoned, free from the dampness of the outside night air. In his occupation he was obsequiously waited upon by his German dependent, who in despite of the archer's rough treatment of him, looked up to his master with slavish admiration. Usually Conrad, now rapidly recovering from his wounds, lay at full length on the warm roof, saying little but thinking much of the absent Hilda.

The archer disdained all armour with the exception of a steel cap, which he wore to ward off battle-axe strokes, should he come into close quarters with the wielders of that formidable weapon, and this helmet he kept brightly polished till it shone like silver. It was somewhat hot to wear in mid-summer, but the head was defended from the warmth of the sun's rays by a lining of cloth which also made the cap more comfortable, because more soft, in the wearing. The archer sat thus with his pile of arrows by his side and the material for their making in front of him, while his slave crouched near, ready to anticipate his wants by promptly handing to him knife or scraping flint, or length of wood, or feather, as the case might require. Surrey's steel cap projected above the parapet and glistened like a mirror in the sun. He was droning to himself a Saxon song, and was as well contented with the world as a warrior may be who is not allowed, at the moment, to scatter wounds and death among his fellow creatures.

Suddenly he was startled by a blow on his steel

helmet, which for an instant caused him to think some one had struck him sharply, forgetting that his position made such an act impossible, but this thought had barely time to flash through his mind when he saw an arrow quivering against the flag pole in front of him. He looked at it for a moment with dropped jaw like a man dazed, then as Conrad and the other made motion to rise he cried gruffly :

“Lie down !” as though he spoke to a pair of dogs. The two, however, promptly obeyed.

“There seems to be an expert archer in the camp as well as in the castle,” said Conrad. John Surrey sat without moving and without replying, gazing on the arrow which had come to rest in the flag pole. At last he said to his dependant :

“Gottlieb, rise cautiously and peer over the battlements, taking care to show as little of your head as possible, and tell me if you see any one in the camp who looks as if he had sped a shaft.”

“I see a tall man,” began Gottlieb.

“Yes !” cried the archer.

“Who stands with his hand shading his eyes, looking up at this tower.”

“Yes, yes.”

“In the fist by his side I think he holds a bow like yours ; but the distance is too great for me to make sure what it is.”

“He has no cross-bow at least.”

“No, it is not a cross-bow.”

“I thought so. No cross-bow could have sent shaft like that. I doubt also if archer living, save Roger Kent, could have——”

“He seems to be placing another arrow on the string.”

“Then down, down with you. If he has caught sight of your head you are doomed.”

An instant later another arrow struck the helmet, glanced over the tower, and disappeared in the forest beyond.

“Now come and sit beside me, Gottlieb,” said

Surrey, as he lifted the helmet gently and moved away his head from beneath it, not shifting the cap except slightly upwards from its position. "Get under this, and sit steadily so that the target may not be displaced."

Having thus crowned his dependent, Surrey crawled to his bow and selected a well-finished arrow.

"You are surely not going to use your weapon," said Conrad. "The Lord Rodolph has forbidden it."

"He has forbidden it unless I am attacked, and there is the arrow in the pole to prove attack. Besides, I shoot not to kill."

With much care Surrey, exposing himself as little as might be, drew bow and let fly. The tall archer was seen to spring aside, then pause regardless of his danger, stoop and pick up something which lay at his feet, examining the object minutely. Surrey also, unthinking of danger, stood up and watched the other, who, when his examination had been concluded to his satisfaction, dropped the arrow, which was undoubtedly what he had picked up, although the distance was too great for the archer to be sure of that, and, doffing his cap, waved it wildly in the air. Surrey himself gave utterance to a shout that might have aroused even the Archbishops on the height, and danced round like one gone mad, throwing his arms about as if he were an animated windmill.

"It is Roger! It is Roger!" he cried.

The Emperor, hearing the tumult, came hurriedly up the stairs, expecting that an assault was in preparation, and, although relieved to find that no onslaught was intended, seemed to think the archer's ecstasy more vociferous than the occasion demanded. John pointed excitedly at his far-off friend, and said he wished permission to visit him at once, to learn what had befallen him since last they met.

"That is impossible," replied Rodolph. "You would be taken prisoner, and I have no wish to lose so good an archer merely because the opposition camp has, according to your account, a better one."

This obvious comment on his proposal dampened the enthusiasm of the archer, who stood in deep thought regarding wistfully the distant form of his friend. At last he said :

“ Would it not be possible then for Roger to visit me here in the castle ? ”

“ I do not see how that may be accomplished. He cannot come here as our friend, and he must not come as a spy. If he refused to give information to his officers when they discovered he had been within the castle, they would imprison him. If he asked their consent before coming, permission would be given only because they expected to learn something from him on his return. We could not receive him even as a deserter, for if starvation be their game, we have enough mouths to feed as it is. And I do not suppose he would desert, if he has taken service with the Archbishop.”

“ Alas, no,” said Surrey, sadly ; “ he would no more think of deserting than would I myself, having once taken fee for the campaign. It is a blessing that he is a modest man and not given to vaunting his own skill, in the which he differs somewhat from myself perhaps, and thus his commander is little likely to learn his usefulness providing Roger is left to the making of papyrus and poetry, for he alone might subdue this strong castle. If he were set to it there would be no possibility of keeping watch or guard, for he could easily kill any man who showed head above parapet. Not finding me in the ranks of the Archbishop’s men, he must have surmised I was here, for fate has always enlisted us on opposite sides, and he perhaps recognised the gleam of my helmet in the sun, and only sent his arrow the more surely to discover my presence, for there are guards on the battlements below whom he might readily have slaughtered had there been deadly motive in his aiming.”

“ He is about to shoot again,” cried Conrad, in alarm.

All looked towards the archer, and it was evident

he was preparing another shaft. Surrey waved at him and shouted a warning, but the distance was too great for his voice to carry effectually. Roger Kent on this occasion held the bow above his head and let fly at the arch of heaven. No one on the tower could mark the flight of the arrow, but they saw the sender of it stand and gaze upward after it.

"It is a message of some sort," said Surrey. "Conrad and Gottlieb, get you down to the room below, as you are unarmoured. It will not hurt my Lord, who is in a suit of mail, and I wear my steel cap."

The two obeyed the command with notable alacrity.

"But it may strike you on the shoulder," protested Rodolph.

"I shall watch for it," replied Surrey, "and will be elsewhere when it falls. Do not look upward, I beg of you, my Lord, for thus was our Saxon King, Harold, slain by a like shaft from one of Roger's ancestors. Stand where you are, looking downward, or, better, retire below."

Rodolph laughed.

"I am surely as nimble as you are," he said, "and may thus escape like you the falling shaft."

As the Emperor spoke the arrow came in sight and swiftly descended, speeding down alongside the flag pole so close as almost to touch it on its way. The arrow shattered itself by impact on the stone, and thus loosened a scroll that had been wrapped tightly round it, fastened at each end. Surrey pounced upon this and found the message to be in several sections, one being a letter, while on the others were verse, regarding which the writer, in his communication, begged perusal and criticism. The missive thus launched into the air had evidently been prepared for some time in readiness to be sent when opportunity offered. Surrey gave utterance to several impatient exclamations as he, with considerable difficulty, coned the meaning of the script, and at last he said :

“ Roger tells me nothing about how he came to be in the Archbishop’s army, nor does he give tidings of anything that should be of interest to a reasonable being. It is all upon his poetry and the lessons to be learned from a perusal of the same, which I think had been better put in the poetry itself, for if it convey so little to the reader that it needs must be explained ’twere as well not written.”

“ That shows you to be no true poet, nor critic either,” said the Emperor. “ But now that old friends are in correspondence with each other, I shall leave them to the furtherance of it, merely reminding you that if a message is sent similar to the one received, you will observe like caution in not mentioning anything that relates to the castle or its occupants.”

When the Emperor left him the archer laboured hard to transcribe his thoughts on the back of a sheet containing one of the poems. He told Roger he was not permitted to leave the castle, but that he had orders to go on guard upon the western battlements at midnight to take up his watch until daybreak, and if Roger could quit the camp at that hour and climb the hill, keeping the north tower against the sky as his guide, the writer would endeavour to meet him half-way, when they could talk over their mutual adventures since parting. In case there was a companion at his watch that night, and it was thus impossible for him to desert the castle, the up-comer was to approach the wall under the northern tower, giving the customary cry of the water-fowl, when the friend on the wall and the one at the foot of it might have some whispered communication between them. He added, however, that there was little danger of a second man being on the battlements unless a new alarm of some kind intervened. The leaf containing these instructions he deftly fastened to the shaft of an arrow and so sped it to the feet of his friend, who was himself on guard.

When Roger had read what was sent he waved his hand in apparent token that the arrangement suited

him, and Surrey, so understanding the signal, went to the room below and threw himself on his pallet of straw to get the rest he needed before his watch began. Like all great warriors he was instantly asleep, and knew no more until he felt Gottlieb's hand on his shoulder announcing to him the beginning of his vigil. Once on the ramparts, he relieved the man who had been there during the earlier part of the night, and was pleased to note that nothing had occurred to put an extra guard on the promenade. The camp fires had gone out, and the valley lay in blackness. Surrey paced up and down the battlements for a while to let the sleepy man he had relieved get to his bed, then he looked about him for means of reaching the foot of the wall outside. There was as yet no cry of the night bird, and he began to fear that his friend had probably gone so soundly asleep that daylight alone would awaken him. Surrey examined the wall with some care. He might jump over without running great risk of injuring himself, but he could not jump back again. At the remote end of the battlements, under the north tower, his foot struck an obstacle, and, stooping to examine the obstruction, he found it one of the wooden missiles with a rope attached to it which the besiegers had flung over the machicolated parapet to enable them to climb the wall. The rope hung down outside, and Surrey wondered that it had remained there all this time unnoticed, certainly a grave menace to the safety of the garrison, for a whole troop might have climbed up in the darkness with little chance of being seen by the one sentinel on top, whose watch, now that all fear of attack had left those in the castle, had become somewhat perfunctory. However, this was just the thing the archer needed, and he marvelled why he had not thought of such a plan before, for numbers of these ropes and billets lay in the courtyard of the fortress. He slipped down the cord and made his way cautiously through the vineyard towards the village, pausing now and then to give the signal. About half-way down the hill, he

heard the breaking of twigs, and knew that his friend was coming up. He crouched under the vines and waited; then as the other came opposite him, he sprang up and gave him a vigorous slap on the shoulder. Instantly the stranger grappled him, pinioning his arms at his side, and the next thing the archer knew he had stumbled backwards and fallen, with the assailant's knee on his breast and a strong grip at his throat, shutting off the breath and making outcry impossible, even if it had been politic.

CHAPTER XXIX.

CONRAD VENTURES HIS LIFE FOR HIS LOVE.

HILDA had been given lodging in a house at the back of the village, and from her window she could see the castle which had so inhospitably sent her from its gates. But the girl had little time to mourn her fate, for the attacks on the castle followed so swiftly one upon another that Alken became speedily filled with wounded men, all the houses of the place being transformed into hospitals for the time. In like manner the women were requisitioned as nurses, and to their care many of the stricken men owed life. Into this humane occupation Hilda threw herself with a fervour that was not only admirable in itself, but which was deeply appreciated by all those to whom she ministered. The other women of the village were anxious to do their best, but they were for the most part rude and ignorant peasants, knowing little of their new duties, and their aid was at all times clumsy and often ineffectual. But Hilda brought to bear upon her task an enlightened intelligence and a deftness of hand, the product of long residence amidst civilised surroundings, which quickly gave her, by right of dexterity, the command of the nursing staff. She reduced the arrangements to cleanliness and order, and her bright presence, not less than her winning beauty, seemed to do more for the convalescent than the ointment of the physicians. She was thoroughly womanly, and thus was in her element while having charge of so many injured men, and every moment of her day being taken up with her work of mercy, she had no time to brood over her own expulsion from the castle, nor the severance from her lover and mistress; and so, in

doing good to others, she unconsciously bestowed great benefit upon herself.

Once she had a fright that for the time almost deprived her of speech. In the midst of her duties a breathless messenger brought news that the Archbishops themselves were coming to visit the wounded. Hilda, pressing her hand to her heart, stood pale and confounded, not knowing what to do, for she feared the sharp eyes of Arnold von Isenberg, which had before fallen upon her in Treves, might now recognise her. She hoped that the comparative obscurity of the room would shield her from too minute scrutiny, and, at first it seemed that this would be the case, but the officers who accompanied the prelates spoke so enthusiastically of her untiring efforts to ameliorate distress and pain, that Arnold turned his keen eyes full upon her, slightly wrinkling his brow, as if her appearance brought recollection to him that he had difficulty in localising. The girl stood trembling before him, not daring to raise her eyes to his. After a moment's pause, filled with deep anxiety on her part, the dignified prelate stretched out his hand and rested it upon her fair hair.

"Blessed are those who do deeds of mercy, my child," he said, solemnly, in sonorous voice.

"Amen," responded the Archbishop of Cologne, with equal seriousness.

"Remember," said von Isenberg, significantly, turning to his officers, "that on her head rests the benediction of our Holy Church."

All present bowed low and the stately cortege withdrew, leaving the girl thankful that recognition had not followed the unlooked-for encounter, for so little do the great take account of those who serve them, that no suspicion crossed the Archbishop's mind that the one he commended had been a member of his own household.

Thus it came about that Hilda was a privileged person in Alken and its environs, and there was not an officer or common soldier who would not instantly

have drawn weapon to protect her from insult or injury had there been any in the camp inclined to transgress against her.

Late one night a lad called at the house where Hilda lived and told her a soldier had hurt his foot and could not walk. He was seated on the river bank, the boy added, and asked the good nurse to come to him, as he could not come to her. Hilda followed her conductor through the darkness without question, and found the man sitting by the margin of the stream. He gave a coin to the boy, who at once ran off to tell his comrades of his good luck, leaving the two alone. Hilda, although without fear, called after the boy, but he paid little heed to her; then she turned to the man and said:

“Where is your wound?”

“In the heart, Hilda, and none save you can cure it,” he answered in a low voice. The girl gave a little cry of joy.

“Conrad! Is it indeed you? Where have you come from?”

“From the castle, where for many days I have lain wounded, but now I am well again and yearn only for you. So to-night I took one of the scaling ropes that the Archbishop’s men used, and which Count Heinrich captured, and, watching my opportunity when the sentinel was at the other end of the battlements, I clambered down to the foot of the wall, descended the hill, crawled through the lines unseen, and here I am. I was free from danger the moment I reached the village, for there are so many men hereabout that one more or less is not noticed, and luckily I am dressed as Treves men dress. I looked to have trouble in finding where you lived, but every one knew of the nurse Hilda, and spoke of her good deeds, so, not wishing to come upon you without warning, I asked the lad to bring you to a wounded soldier. It is not so long since I was one in reality.”

“But you are not wounded now?” asked Hilda, anxiously.

"No. I am as well as ever again."

"And you have braved all this danger to see me?"

"Indeed the danger is but slight, Hilda, and I do not even see you plainly, but perhaps you will make amends for the darkness"; saying which the young man placed his arm about her and kissed her tenderly, and to this demonstration there was little opposition on the part of Hilda.

"Can you return unseen as you came?" she asked.

"With less difficulty. The archer is on guard from midnight until dawn, and even if he detected me, he would say nothing, for we are right good friends. We are comrades, both serving Lord Rodolph, and not the Black Count. I shall not return before midnight."

"Oh, but I dare not remain here so long. They would search for me, and you would be discovered."

"You will stay as long as you can, will you not, Hilda? When you are gone I shall make my way back through the lines and wait for the coming of the archer on the battlements, unless there is good opportunity of mounting before then."

"I like not all these risks for my sake, Conrad."

"I am more selfish than you think. It is for my own sake that I come."

And again he proved the truth of his statement, although the girl forbore to chide him for his levity of conduct.

"Have you seen my Lady? How is she?" asked Hilda.

"I see her but seldom, though she is well, I know."

The two were so absorbed in their converse that neither noticed gathering round them, stealthily enclosing them, a group of a dozen men led by an officer. They were therefore startled when the officer cried:

"Stand! Make no resistance. You are prisoner."

The men instantly closed in on Conrad and had him pinioned before he could think of escape.

"Why do you seize him?" said Hilda to the leader,

hiding her agitation the better because of the darkness that surrounded them.

"He is a spy, gentle nurse," answered the officer in kindly tone, "and shall be hanged as one ere morning. His story of a wound is doubtless false. He gave the boy a coin with the effigy of the Count Heinrich on it, and one to whom the lad showed the coin sent warning to us. If this man can tell us how he came by such a silver piece, and can show us a wound got in honourable service under the Archbishop, then he will save his neck, but not otherwise. What questions did he ask you, nurse? I heard you talking together."

"None but those I might answer with perfect safety to both Archbishops."

"Ah, nurse, you know much of healing, but little of camp life, I fear. A question that may appear trivial to you is like to seem important to his Lordship. We give short trials to spies, which is the rule of war everywhere, and always must be."

"He is no spy," maintained Hilda stoutly. "If you hold him, I will go myself to the Archbishop and claim his release. You must give me your word that nothing shall be done until I return."

"It is better to see the captain before troubling the Archbishop with so small a matter."

"A man's life is no small matter."

"Indeed you will find the Archbishop attaches but little importance to it. The case will go before the captain, and it will be well for you to see him, for he may release the man if he wishes. I must hold him prisoner in the square tower until I am told to let him go or to hang him."

With this the officer moved his men on, the silent prisoner in their midst, to the square tower which stood over the centre street of the place. Hilda followed, not knowing what to do.

"I will see the captain," said the officer, evidently desiring to befriend her, "and I will tell you what his decision is. Then you may perhaps be able to give

him good reason why the prisoner should be released, or the man himself may be able to prove his innocence. In that case your intervention will not be needed."

The prisoner had been taken up the narrow stair that led to a room in the tower above the arch that spanned the street.

"I will await you here," said Hilda. She walked up and down in the contracted street until the officer returned.

"I am sorry to say," he began, "that the captain has gone to the Archbishop's tent and no one knows when he will return."

"What am I to do?" cried the girl.

"It is better for you to go home, and when the captain comes I will let you know."

"But if he insists on executing the prisoner, then am I helpless. It will be impossible for me to see the Archbishop until morning."

"Has this man come from the castle?"

"If I answer, what use will you make of what I say?"

"I shall make no use of it, but will give you a hint."

"I trust to your word then. He did come from the castle."

"So I thought. Well, I am responsible for the spies. The captain is responsible for the imperviousness of the line round the castle, and he will be most loath for any one to tell the Archbishop that a man from the castle has broken through the lines to be captured by me on the bank of the river. If one man comes through why not all? will be the natural thought of the Archbishop. This I dare not suggest to the captain, but you may do so, if you find your resolution to see the Archbishop has no effect on him."

"I thank you," said Hilda, simply.

The lieutenant took her hand and whispered:

"What am I to get besides thanks for this valuable hint?"

He tried to draw the girl towards him but she held back, and said quietly :

“ I will give you a hint for a hint. I call to your remembrance the words of the Archbishop concerning me. The benediction of our Holy Church protected me, he said.”

The officer dropped her reluctant hand.

“ I will inform you when the captain comes,” he replied, turning away from her.

It was nearly midnight when the captain returned, the girl anxiously awaiting him. It was found, however, that her intercession was not necessary. The Archbishop, it seemed, had given general instructions that any one attempting to leave Thuron was to be sent back unharmed, on giving his parole that he would not again desert the stronghold. The shrewd prelate did not propose to help Heinrich indirectly by capturing and executing his men, thus leaving him with fewer mouths to fill. His object was to bring starvation to Thuron as speedily as possible, and it was not likely he would allow either death or imprisonment to be an ally of the Black Count. But a difficulty presented itself, for the prisoner, undeterred by threats, obstinately refused to give his word that he would not again attempt to break through the lines. In vain did the captain sternly acquaint him with the invariable fate of the spy, asserting that the clemency of the Archbishop arose through his Lordship's noted kindness of heart; that the terms of his liberation were simple and much more humane than any other commander in the world would impose; nevertheless, Conrad stoutly maintained that he would break through the lines whenever it pleased him to do so, and if they caught him next time they were quite welcome to hang him. The captain was nonplussed, for the prisoner asserted this with the rope actually round his neck. The lieutenant whispered that the nurse Hilda seemed to have wonderful influence over the man and proposed that she be called and the case stated to her, whereupon she might persuade him to

be more reasonable, although all their threats had failed. Accordingly Hilda was sent for, the lieutenant telling her on the way that the captain would spare the prisoner's life if he but gave his word that he would not again return to Alken, concealing, however, the fact that the captain dare not execute the man.

"If I may speak with him alone," she said, "I will try to convince him that he should give the captain his word, and I know he will keep it once it is given, otherwise he would have promised you anything to get free."

"Yes, the captain himself said as much, wondering why a man should so hesitate in the face of certain death."

They found Conrad standing bound, with a loop round his neck, the rope being threaded through an iron ring in the ceiling, while two stout men-at-arms held the loose end ready to pull him to destruction when their officer gave the word.

The captain, on hearing Hilda's proviso, ordered his men to withdraw, and, following them himself with the lieutenant, left Hilda alone with Conrad.

The subordinate officer suggested to his chief that the girl might untie the man and thus allow him to escape, as she seemed to have much interest in his welfare.

"Indeed," said the captain, with a shrug, "it is my devout hope that she will do so, if he refuses to take parole, for I know not what to do with the fool. If then you see him sneak away, in God's name let him go, and we will search ineffectually for him when it is too late. We shall be well rid of him."

When all had gone, Hilda said to her lover:

"You must promise, Conrad, not to come again to Alken. You run a double risk; first from the officers here; second from your own master when you return. Therefore give your word that you will attempt no such dangerous task again."

"How can I do that, Hilda? I must see you, otherwise life is unbearable to me. If I should promise I could not hold to it."

"It will be easy for us to meet, Conrad, without running such risks. I can pass through the lines at any time unchallenged, so on mid-week night I shall go up to the castle walls, and there we may be together without scathe. If we are discovered and I am made prisoner in Thuron, that will not matter. They will not harm me, and I shall then be where I wish to be. But with you it is different; if they capture you again, it will be impossible for me to save you, for they will believe you are a spy. Let me then meet you under the safe walls of Thuron, for I am as anxious to see you as you are to see me."

"It delights me to hear you say so, Hilda, but I like not the thought of you climbing this dark hill alone."

"Pooh, that is nothing. I shall most willingly do it, and then we can whisper to each other whatever seems of most interest, without fear of being interrupted, the constant terror of which would haunt us in Alken. The shadow of the frowning walls of Thuron makes an ideal lover's trysting-place, therefore, Conrad, give the captain your promise, and meet me under the north tower, two nights hence, at the same hour that you sent for me in Alken."

"It seems the only thing to do. I can come down the hill to meet you, so that you——"

"No, no. We will meet under the walls of Thuron; that is settled, and I shall now call the captain and his men to unbind you. I suppose they would not be pleased if I untied your cords."

The impatient captain, to his amazement, was summoned, after he had quite made up his mind that the girl would connive at the prisoner's escape. Conrad then, in presence of the men, gave the captain his word that he would not again attempt to pass the lines, and that he would inform no one in the castle of anything he might chance to have seen or heard while he was in Alken. He was then unbound and conducted through the lines, and set his face towards the steep and dark hill as the deep toned bell of the castle struck the hour of midnight. Although he had not

told Hilda so, he feared treachery from the captain and his men. He had seen the captain's hesitancy regarding his threatened execution and wondered why that officer contented himself with the simple word of a captured underling, for Conrad knew how little dependence was placed even on the oath of such as he. He believed that for some reason the captain did not wish to hang him, but intended to have him set on in the dark and there quietly made away with. So when he had mounted a few steps he paused and listened intently, but could detect no indication of followers. Further up he paused again, and this time he certainly heard some one coming with apparent caution, yet, as if unfamiliar with the ground, the follower stumbled now and again among the vines and bushes. Conrad hurried up the slope and paused a third time, now being sure that he was indeed tracked, for the man behind came on with less circumspection and prudence. As Conrad, resolving to distance his pursuer in the race, plunged onward and upwards, he was startled by a man springing from the bushes in front who seized him by the shoulder. Instantly Conrad sprang upon him, making no outcry and determined that his antagonist should make none either, for he clutched the unknown firmly by the throat, and bore him to the earth, squeezing all possibility of sound from his windpipe. Kneeling thus above his unexpected foe, he tried to reach his knife, to give quietus to the under man before his accomplice could come up with them, for in spite of the absence of cries the two combatants made much noise thrashing about among the vines; but now the under man, who had been so easily pushed backwards, seemed to gather both strength and courage, fighting with such bravery of despair that Conrad had all he could do to keep him down, using both hands instead of one. If he was to maintain his position on top, the knife was out of the question, so he devoted his efforts to the strangling of the man beneath him. In the midst of this arduous occupation, the third man arrived on the scene.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE STRUGGLE IN THE DARK.

"HOLD!" cried the newcomer. "Which is for the Archbishop—under dog or upper dog? A plague on this darkness which lets me see distinctly neither one nor the other."

Surrey underneath could not speak, and Conrad above thought it more prudent not to speak.

"Answer, upper dog," cried Roger Kent, peering at them, "or take your fingers from the under dog's throat and let him answer, otherwise I will run my knife into you on the chance that you are my enemy."

"You are free," said Conrad, maintaining his hold, but conscious that he had little chance against the two of them, "therefore declare yourself."

"I have no shame in doing so. I fight for the Archbishop and the Church."

"Then stand aside and see whether Archbishop or Black Count wins."

"Nay, that I will not do. You are no true follower of the Church or you would call me to your aid. Release your hold of the other's throat, or I will draw my knife across yours."

Conrad, seeing that the game was up, and guessing also that the two were not comrades and accomplices, as he had at first supposed, relaxed his hold and stood up. The other lay gasping where he had fallen.

"Now speak, fellow, an' enough breath has returned to you; are you for the White Cross or the Black Count?"

With some difficulty Surrey rose to a sitting posture, and said at last:

"Indeed I think I must be the Black Count himself,

for with the choking I have had, my face, could any see it, more nearly resembles that of His Swarthiness than it does the lilies of the field."

"Is it you, archer?" asked Conrad in surprise, stepping forward.

"Yes," answered Surrey and Kent simultaneously, then the former added, shaking himself as he rose to his feet, "at least it was me before your most unlooked for interference, but who I am now it is beyond me accurately to tell. If you are Conrad, then what the devil do you here out of the castle on the hillside after midnight, when all honest folk, except those on watch, should be sleeping soundly on straw?"

"If it comes to that," replied Conrad, "what do you here, honest watchman, who at this moment are supposed to be faithfully guarding the battlements of Castle Thuron?"

"That in truth is a knotty question to answer, and I confess myself grievously in the wrong, in thus breaking my watch, and feel the more inclined to say, let us make a pact together, for if you inform not on me, then is my mouth shut regarding your own flagrant delinquencies. These I find hard to pardon, for a man owes it to his comrades during besiegement to stand by them and not to be found coming up from the camp of the enemy."

"I am not on guard, and therefore have broken no oath. My desertion is as white compared to thine as was my face to thine a few moments since."

"True, true. There is much to be said on both sides of the question, and if I had the judging in the matter we should each of us hang, that is, did the cases come impartially before me, without personal consequences affecting me in any way. And to think that I once had the privilege of sending an arrow through you at three yards distance, was begged to speed it, and neglected the opportunity! It serves me right well to be choked for thus putting aside the gifts of Providence."

"I am truly sorry I laid hands on you, but I was

looking for an attack by the Archbishop's men, and when you came suddenly upon me I did what seemed best, for it is ill running up the hill, and I feared to run down as I heard this fellow on my track."

"I was journeying to meet my friend," said Roger, "and had no thought that any was before me until I heard the struggle. We seem all three equally foolish and equally guilty, therefore let us all forgive one another, as becomes Christians."

"I bear no malice," said Surrey; "but I will say that had he not taken me unaware, as I was looking for a friend, the contest might have turned out differently. Still it matters little, unless they have discovered my absence in the castle and have sent Conrad in search of me, in the which case I had better abandon bow and take to the camp of the Archbishops. Were you looking for me, Conrad? If not, why are you here?"

"I left the castle long before you did, most like. I went to the village to find Hilda, who was with us on the voyage down from Treves."

"Ah, that is the wench for whose sake you risked having an arrow hurtled through your vitals at Zurlauben, and, learning nothing, stake your life for her again. The folly of man!"

"Judge him not harshly, John," murmured the poet. "Admire rather the power wielded by true love. 'Tis the most beautiful thing on earth: the noblest passion that inspires the human breast. That a man should gladly venture his life on the chance of a few words with his beloved, shows us this world is not the sordid, disputatious place we sometimes fancy it to be. What other motive could so influence a man?"

"Tush, Roger!" cried his friend, with some impatience. "Your head is ever in the clouds, and you therefore see not what lies at your feet. Thousands of men continually risk their lives, and lose them, for less than threepence a day. No such motive as love! Nonsense! Friendship is every whit as strong, and we stand here to prove it, who have both this night

risked our lives that we may but talk with one another. Out upon rhapsodies."

"Nay, John, if you were a true poet you would not speak in gross ignorance as now you do. If you try to weave friendship into verse you will find that it rouses not the warmth which the smaller word 'love' calls forth. I say nothing against friendship, for I have tasted the sweets of it, and I know nothing of love, having never myself experienced a touch of it, but I find that in the making of poetry love is the most useful of all the themes that a poet may play upon. Yet have I but to-day accomplished a poem on the delights of friendship, which I will now recite to you both, and which I think does justice to the subject in a manner that has hitherto been withheld from all writers, save perhaps Homer himself!"

"I must be gone to the castle," said Conrad.

"We will walk up the hill with you," rejoined Surrey, "and, Conrad, I wish you would take my watch on the wall till I relieve you. I desire to have converse with my friend here, and we will sit under the wall, where you can give me timely warning if you hear any one approach from within, although I think such interruption most unlikely. Was it on your rope I descended, I wonder?"

"I left a rope dangling at the north-west corner."

"That was it. I marvelled how it came there, and thought it had been flung up by the besiegers, remaining unseen by the garrison. Will you, then, take my watch for a time, Conrad?"

"Surely. 'Tis but slight recompense for the choking I——"

"Yes, yes," interrupted the archer, hurriedly, "we will not speak of that, for you took me by surprise. Mount to the battlements, and you will find my pike lying on the top of the wall near the place of descent."

They had by this time reached the castle, and there they stood for a few moments and listened, but everything was quiet, and Conrad, aided by the hang-

ing rope, ascended to the top, while the two archers sat down at the foot of the northern tower.

"The poem on 'Friendship,'—" began Roger.

"Yes," broke in his friend, "we will come to it presently. How is it you are fighting for the Archbishop?"

"How is it you sent no word back to me as you promised to do?"

"That is a long story. They would not even let me enter Treves, for there was nothing of all this afoot when I was there. On finding service at last, having journeyed to a hill-top within a league of this place, I tried to send tidings to you by the young man who has just left us, but he was baffled and turned back by the forces of the Archbishop, and could no more get to Treves than I could enter it once I was at its gates. We are all prisoners here, and until your arrow tapped my steel cap I knew not where you were."

"Hearing nothing I went to Treves in search of you, regretting I had not accompanied you, but you know there were important poems that I wished to complete when you left me—they are all finished now, and it would have done you good to hear them; in fact, it was that which made me follow you to Treves, for the consummation of a poem is the listening to it. There is one set of verses on 'Sleep' that luckily I remember, and can recite, if you will but harken."

"What happened when you reached Treves?"

"I made enquiry concerning you from all with whom I could gain speech, but there was nothing save talk of war in the place, and nowhere could I hear aught of you. One army had already left Treves, marching eastward, and another was then filling its ranks. The officer I spoke with, who was inducing all he could to join, offering great chances of plunder when the castle was taken, said he remembered you well, and that you had gone with the first army, leaving word that I was to join and follow you."

"The liar. I wonder the Archbishop retains the service of such, although perhaps he does not know his officers hold the truth in contempt."

"It is strange you should refer so warmly to truth, for I esteem it the choicest of all virtues, and have written a poem on 'Whiterobed Truth,' which I hope remains in my memory, seeing it is so dark that no reading may be done. It begins——"

"You believed him, of course, and enlisted with him?"

"Yes. He said we should find you here, and so indeed have I, but in the opposite camp. I marched with them down the river, and when we arrived I heard such wonderful stories of an infallible archer in the castle that I knew he must be you."

"Yes," cried John, rubbing his hands together in glee, "it was the most heavenly opportunity ever bestowed upon a mortal man. I wish you had been there to see. I was in the tower above the enemy, and I shot them in the neck, stringing them one after another on the shafts, like running skewers in a round of beef. Not one did I miss."

"Oh, 'tis easily done," commented Roger, carelessly. "'Tis instinct, largely; you glance at your mark, and next instant your arrow is there."

"Roger Kent," replied the other, in a despondent tone, "I have on various occasions passed favourable judgment on your poems; I think you might, in return, admit that I am at least proficient in the rudiments of archery."

"John Surrey, I have more than once expressed the opinion, which I still hold, that you will in time, with careful practice, become a creditable archer. You would not have me say more and thus forswear myself."

"No," admitted John; "I am well content when you say as much, and now if it pleases you I will listen to as many of your verses as you can conveniently remember."

Surrey leaned back against the wall with a deep

sigh, and the other, his voice vibrant with enthusiasm, said :

“ I will recite you first the poem on ‘ Friendship,’ in honour of our meeting, and then you shall hear the verses on ‘ Sleep,’ which come the more timely on an occasion when we both deprive ourselves of it, in order to hear verse which you will be the first to admit is well worth the sacrifice.”

The poet then delivered his lines in smooth and measured tones, to which the other listened without comment. From poem to poem Roger Kent glided, sometimes interlarding the pauses between with a few sentences describing how the following effort came to maturity, thus cementing the poems together with their history, as a skilful mason lays his mortar between the stones. No literary enthusiast could have had a more patient listener, and the night wore on to the tuneful cadence of the poet’s voice. At last he ceased. The steps of the patient Conrad on the battlements echoed in the still night air.

“ Those are all the poems I can remember,” he said, “ and you see that I have not misspent the time while you were journeying down the Moselle. I do not know when I have had a more fruitful season. If I could but deliver these verses to some monk who would inscribe them on lasting parchment, for future ages to discuss and con over, I would be a happy man. Alas, the monks care not to write of aught save the sayings of the Fathers of the Church, and look askance at poems dealing with human instincts and passions that are beyond the precincts of the cloister, even though such poems tend to the future enrichment of literature, had the holy men but the mind to appreciate them. Thus I fear my verse will be lost to the world and that, in this deplorably contentious existence which we lead, my span may be suddenly at an end, with none to put in permanent form the work to which my life has been devoted. What poem, think you, of all you have heard, is the most likely to live after we are gone? ”

There was no reply, and in the silence that followed, the even breathing of John Surrey brought to the mind of the poet the well nigh incredible suspicion that his friend was asleep. This suspicion, however, he dismissed as unworthy of either of them, and he shook his comrade by the shoulder, repeating his question.

"Eh? What?" cried John. "Take your hand from my throat, villain."

"My hand is not on your throat but on your shoulder, and I misdoubt you have for some time been asleep."

"Asleep?" cried John, with honest indignation. "I was far from being asleep. When you stopped reciting I had but let my mind wander for a moment on the rough usage I had had from Conrad, who pretended he did not know me. I'll wing a shaft by his ear so close that it will make him jump a dozen yards, and for the space while he counts ten he will be uncertain whether he is in this world or the next. I called him villain, and I stick to it."

"But what call you my poems?"

"They are grand—all of them. You are getting better and better at rhyming; I swear by the bow, you are. I never heard anything to equal them."

"Indeed," replied the poet, complacently, "a man should improve with age, like good wine, if he have the right stuff in him, but though all are so good, there is surely some poem better than the rest, as in a company of men one must stand taller than his fellows. Which was it, John?"

"The last one you recited seemed to me the best," said John, scratching his head dubiously, and then not having the sense to let well enough alone, added, "the one on 'Sleep.'"

The poet rose to his feet and spoke with justifiable indignation.

"I have recited to you a score since that, you sluggard. You have indeed been asleep."

"I said not the last, but the first. I say the poem on 'Sleep' is the best, and that I hold to."

"The first was on 'Friendship,'" said the poet gloomily.

"Nay, I count not the one on 'Friendship' as aught but the introduction. 'Twas given, you said, in honour of our meeting, therefore I regard the one on 'Sleep' as the beginning, and although all are good, that seemed, in my poor judgment, the best."

"I had hoped you would have liked the one on 'Woman's Love,'" murmured Roger, evidently mollified.

"Ah, Roger, what can you expect of a hardened bachelor like me? There was a time when I would have thrown up my cap and proclaimed that poem master of them all, which doubtless it will be accounted in the estimation of the world. Even I admit it was enough to make my old bones burn again, and while you were reciting it, I was glad young Conrad was not here, else he had straightway run to Alken in his own despite. That poem will be the favourite of lovers all the world over; I am sure of it."

"Say you so, honest John?" cried Roger, with glee. "It is indeed my own hope. You were the truest and wisest of critics, and no bowman in all Germany can match you. Forgive me that I mistook your meditation for slumber. And now, good night, old friend; we will meet again when I have composed some others, although I doubt if I ever do anything as good as that one."

And thereupon the friends embraced and parted, each glowing with the praise of the other.

CHAPTER XXXI.

BRAVE NEWS OF THE EMPEROR.

As the days went by and the seasons changed, dull monotony settled down upon the besieged castle, and all within felt more or less its depressing effects. The Black Count chafed under it like a caged lion, breaking out now and then into helpless rage, eager to do anything rather than the one thing which had to be done, and that was to sit quiet until the Archbishops tired of their task, or until some commotion occurred elsewhere which would compel them to withdraw their troops. Heinrich had wild schemes of breaking through the lines, marching on to Treves, and there fomenting rebellion, so that Arnold might find something to occupy him at home and be thus compelled to leave his neighbour in peace. But the cool head in the garrison was that of Rodolph, who pointed out calmly to his nominal chief the impracticability of his plans. He knew more of Treves than did the Count, and asserted that no man could stir up trouble in that town, where all were but too well acquainted with the weight of the Archbishop's iron hand.

It was not to be expected that two men so differently constituted as the Emperor and the Count, thus hemmed in together, should grow to love each other; indeed, Heinrich took small pains to conceal the dislike he felt for his enforced guest, although Rodolph was more politic, and always treated his elder with grave respect. Only once during the two years' siege did there come a conflict of authority between them, and this said much for the forbearance of the Emperor.

One morning Rodolph found the Count in the courtyard in full armour vigorously superintending his men,

who were removing from the gates the bags of grain and casks of wine which were piled against them.

"What is going forward?" asked Rodolph, quietly.

"Something that concerns you not, and your assistance is neither asked nor wanted," answered the Black Count, in his most surly manner.

"Pardon me, if I venture to point out that anything which pertains to the safety of the castle concerns me."

"Whose castle is it?" roared the Count.

"That is precisely the point now under dispute," replied the Emperor, with the utmost gravity. "If you do some foolish thing the castle doubtless will in a few hours belong to the Archbishops, for they are probably counting on an act of folly which will bring them into possession. I am anxious that the castle remain in your hands, therefore I ask again, what are you proposing to do, and why are you taking away the materials which so well supported the gates when they were assaulted?"

"I am commander here and not to be questioned."

"That is hardly according to our compact, my Lord. Let us not, however, discuss the matter before the men, but in the council chamber alone together. I must know what you intend to do."

"I have held my castle until now against all comers. I will continue to keep it in my own way."

"Your memory is short, my Lord. Your castle was saved in the first assault by my archer. In the two following it was kept largely by my generalship, if I may be so conceited as to claim as much. You did some stentorian shouting, and some wondrous catapult practice, which, if it killed any, wrought their death more by amazement at the work, than through the accuracy of the machines. I came here a stranger, but am now well known to the men, and they have confidence in me. If we must have deplorable dissensions in their presence I will at once give command for them to cease work, and you will see how many obey me. It is best not to force me to this extremity, for

if I am thus put to it, you will give no more orders in this castle. Let it come to an open contest between you and me, and you will be amazed to find that all who rally round you are Steinmetz and one or two others, hirelings at best, whom you, knowing nothing of men, have placed above the others, and even they will at once desert you when they find you standing practically alone. Therefore, my Lord, I ask you for the third time what you intend to do?"

The cool and firm insistence of the Emperor had a quenching effect on the other's anger. The Count began to doubt the wisdom of his hot-headed resolve, for he had, in spite of himself, a growing confidence in Rodolph's generalship, and his bluster was largely caused by the shame he felt in placing his plans before the incisive criticism of his comrade in arms. He turned brusquely away from Rodolph, and said, curtly:

"Very well. Let us to the council chamber."

The Emperor followed him, and was in turn followed by the archer, who always kept an eye on his master, unless definitely commanded not to do so. The archer never pretended that he had the least belief in the good faith of Count Heinrich, and it is likely that Rodolph, although he gave no utterance to his distrust, had as little confidence, for he rarely made objection to the watch John Surrey kept over him. Neither was their vigilance relaxed on the tower. They constantly increased their store of provisions, and allowed no one to come up the stair on any pretence whatever. When the archer was not on watch in the tower, Conrad usually took his place, and the possibility of their having to stand a siege within a siege at any moment was rarely absent from the mind of the Emperor. If the intentions of the Black Count were honest, there was no harm in being ready for the reverse.

When the Emperor and Count reached the council chamber the latter turned sharply round and plunged at once into his explanation.

"I am going to open the gates and sally forth at

the head of my men. I shall cut their line and, sparing none who oppose me, fight as long as may be, then shall we return to the castle. In this way shall I harass them day by day, until they are glad to raise the siege."

"How may men do you intend to leave with me to protect the castle in your absence?"

"The castle needs no protection until I return to it. The Archbishops will find enough to do without troubling Thuron, I shall take all my men with me."

"Have you made any computation regarding the number of soldiers the Archbishops have under their banners?"

"What has that to do with it? The men are scattered north, east, south, and west of this place, and cannot be rallied in time to harm me."

"I am, of course, not in the confidence of the Archbishops and cannot tell how wisely or unwisely their plans are laid. Were I in their place I should count on just such a sortie as you have proposed, caused either by folly or desperation. It is a thing a famished commander might do, or it might be done by one who knew no better. I should have it arranged that a bugle call would cause all available men to march instantly over the hills and cut you off from the gates before you could possibly retreat. As the Archbishops have a hundred men and more to your one, there can be no possible doubt regarding the termination of such a venture as yours. You are as wise as a snail would be to leave his shell, and, unarmed, fight a hawk in the open. The castle is your shell, and remaining in it is your only salvation. I am astonished at the futility of your proposal."

"I cannot sit inactive."

"You must. Otherwise the sane thing to do is to run up a white flag after taking down your own, make terms with the Archbishops and deliver your castle to them. Then you may get concessions, but to sally forth at the head of your men is to deliver your castle at once into their hands, and that without compensation, for

then they take it and capture or kill you. It is the project of a madman."

The Count became fiercely enraged at this merciless criticism, and, almost foaming at the mouth, smote his fist on the table, crying:

"Our weakness is not that we are outnumbered a hundred to one. It is that we are one too many in Thuron. No garrison can prosper under two commanders."

"Again you are mistaken. There are not two commanders, but one only. There are two commanders with the besiegers, and that fact, in spite of their army's strength, is probably the reason the castle has not been taken long since. There is but one commander in Thuron, and I am he."

"You lie!" yelled the Black Count. "I am master of Thuron, and will remain so while a stone of it rests on another."

"Prove yourself so. The weapons with which we previously fought on this question still hang on the wall; only, take warning. I shall use the edge of the sword, and not the flat of it, upon your person when next I face you."

"I shall not honour you by fighting with you, a nameless stranger, for whose quality no one can vouch."

"I bore the honour you formerly bestowed upon me modestly enough, and no one has been told of our encounter. As for the quality of my fighting, you made no complaint at the time."

"I will imprison you as an insubordinate traitor."

"I am even prepared for that, and have been ever since I took my quarters in the tower. The moment you break your word with me I constitute myself my own jailer, and will retire to the tower. There my archer will kill your adherents one by one in the courtyard, or on the battlements, or wherever you dare show yourselves. I will haul down your banner and run up a flag of truce instead. Then, when the envoys of the Archbishop come, I will shout to them

from the tower that we are commanded by a madman. I will make terms with them so far as the ladies are concerned, and will tell them how to take the castle, as not one of your men dare show face upon the walls, fearing my archer. I regret being compelled to show you that you are both helpless and, at the same time, a fool, but you would have it. Now, my Lord, what is to be done? Are you content to hold command under my orders, or am I to be further troubled with your petulance, so that I must humiliate you in the eyes of your own men, depose you publicly, and perhaps imprison you in the castle I would be only too glad to have you hold and keep? I must know definitely and finally, for these discussions cannot continue."

The Black Count rested his shaggy head in his hands, and for a long time there was silence in the room. At last he raised his blood-shot eyes, burning with hate, and shot a question at Rodolph.

"Who are you?"

"Your master. Take that for granted until this siege is ended, then you may discover you have not been in error. If you attempt to fight me as well as the Archbishops the contest will be a short one. In the fiend's name, has your ill temper not left enough of sense in your brain to show you, even in your anger, that it is better to have me fighting for you than against you? Your persistent stupidity exhausts my patience."

"What am I to tell the men whom I have ordered to clear the sacks from the gate? They will think me indeed mad if I bid them reverse their work."

"They think it now, as does every one with whom you come in contact. When the grain is all removed tell them to fill the empty sacks with earth and stones from the cellars, and to place them in position against the gates again. Have this done whenever a sack is emptied in future, so that our consumption of corn will not interfere with the security of the gates. If you have said to any one that you intended to sally

forth, tell him now that you have changed your mind."

This was the last rebellion of Count Heinrich against the usurper within his gates. The ladies, when all met together for the evening meal, did not suspect that there had been any difference between the two men, for Heinrich was invariably so gruff towards his women folk that his demeanour could hardly be made worse by any check he had encountered during the day, and Rodolph's manner was marked by a deferential equanimity that was immutable.

While they were seated at the evening repast Captain Steinmetz entered and made announcement that a holy Palmer was before the gate asking admittance, saying he had news for the master of the castle.

"Where is he from? How did he get through the lines?" demanded the Count.

"I think he is from Palestine," replied Steinmetz, "and he came through the lines by permission of the Archbishops. He says he bears news to you of the Emperor."

"Of the Emperor?" ejaculated Rodolph, in amazement.

"Yes. His Majesty is fighting in the Holy Land, and I think the monk comes from him with news of his battles."

"Ah!" Rodolph looked closely at those who sat round the table, but said nothing further. Tekla gazed with interest at the captain; the Count's eyes were bent on the table, and his wife regarded his dark face timorously.

"We want no news of the Emperor's fighting," said the Count, gruffly, at last. "What matters his fighting to us? A wise man goes not abroad to deal his blows, when there are good knocks to be given in his own land. Tell the Palmer we want none of his budget."

"Not so, my uncle," cried Tekla, her eyes glowing with enthusiasm, "we are all loyal subjects of his

Majesty, I hope, and I confess I should like to hear how he prospers. I beg you to admit the pious father."

"He is most likely a pious spy, sent by the connivance of the Archbishops, whose tool he is. Their Lordships desire to know how matters stand within the fortress."

"Even if that be the case," put in Rodolph, mildly, "I should be the last to baulk their curiosity. It would give me pleasure to have them know that the stout Count Heinrich is well, and has no fear of them, either separate or united. It may comfort the Archbishops to learn that we were faring generously when their envoy came upon us, and that Heinrich of Thuron thought them of so small account that he permitted a man coming from their camp and through their lines to enter his dining hall."

The Count's eye lit up for a moment as he glanced round his hall, then the light died out, gloom came upon his brow, and once more he bent his gaze on the table in silence.

"I would suggest, however, that the Palmer be blindfolded before he is taken up the ladder, and so conducted to the Count's presence. It may be prudent to conceal from him how well the gates are barricaded. If he actually comes from the Emperor, I confess, like the Countess here, I think so much of his Majesty that I should dearly love to have news of him. What say you, my lord Count?"

"Have it as you will. There is no desire on my part to hear of his Majesty, so question the Palmer as best pleases you. Admit the man, Steinmetz, but blindfold him as has been suggested."

A few minutes later the monk was led into the hall, advancing with caution as a blind man does, gropingly uncertain regarding his footsteps, placing one sandal tentatively before the other, as if he feared a trap, although led by the captain, who at last removed the bandage from his blinking eyes, thus bringing him suddenly from darkness to light. The monk bowed

low to each one present, then stood with folded arms, awaiting permission to speak. If he were indeed a spy he showed no indication of it: his face was calm and imperturbable, and looked little like the countenance of a man in fear of the fate which must quickly have followed conviction as an informant.

"You come from the Holy Land, Father?" began Rodolph.

"Not so, my Lord. I come from Frankfort, but there has recently arrived from Palestine a messenger, who brought brave tidings from his noble Majesty, the Emperor Rodolph of Germany."

"Indeed. And who sends you forth, or do you come of your own accord?"

"I am sent forth by the Baron von Brunfels, now in Frankfort, to relate intelligence of the Emperor in all castles and camps and strongholds, to those of noble birth, who are, I trust, loyal subjects of his Majesty."

"That are we all here, holy father," cried Tekla with enthusiasm.

The monk bowed low to the lady.

"I trust that the Baron von Brunfels is well. He is a dear friend of mine," said Rodolph.

"He is well, my Lord, but somewhat haggard with the care of state which has fallen upon him in his Majesty's absence. He is thought to be over-anxious regarding his Majesty's welfare; but I surmise that the news he has now received of him may bring more cheerfulness to his brow than has been seen there of late."

"Doubtless that will be the case," remarked Rodolph, with a deep sigh. "Do you know to what particular part of the business of state Baron von Brunfels bends his energies?"

"Particularly to the army, my Lord. He has greatly increased it, drawing men mainly from Southern Germany, and placing in command of them officers who come from the Emperor's own part of the country. It is said he is raising a company of archers,

not armed with the cross-bow, but with a thin weapon held in one hand, so marvellously inaccurate that when the regiment practices near Frankfort the people round about fly to their houses, saying there is little security for life while that company is abroad, as no prophet can predict where their shafts will alight. Prayers are offered that this company be disbanded, or that Providence will confer greater blessings on their marksmanship than has hitherto been vouchsafed."

"Ah, it is a pity we cannot lend the Baron our good archer, who would do more for the efficiency of the company than much devotion. Does rumour give any reason for this increase of the army, or has Baron von Brunfels said anything regarding its purpose?"

"It is believed that a large reinforcement will presently be sent to the Emperor in Palestine, when the men are more accustomed to their duties."

"A most scandalous waste of human lives," cried the Black Count, sternly. "German men should fight their enemies at home or on the borders of German land. Of what benefit are the desert sands to us, even should we win them?"

The monk seemed shocked at this, and devoutly crossed himself, but made no reply. Tekla flashed an indignant look at her uncle, but spoke instead to Rodolph.

"My Lord," she said, "you seem more interested in the Baron than in the Emperor. I wish to hear of his Majesty's campaign in the Holy Land."

"True, Countess, I had forgotten myself, and I beg you to pardon me. The Baron is a very dear friend of mine, as I have said, but I will have speech with our visitor later concerning him. Now, Father, what of the Emperor?"

"His Majesty, the Emperor, has proven himself a warrior not only of great personal bravery, but one who is a redoubted general as well. He has displayed marvellous knowledge of the arts of war, and has

routed the infidels, horse and foot, wherever he encountered them, scattering them like chaff before the wind. Threescore of their bravest leaders has he slain with his own hand, until now his very name spreads terror throughout the land. When it is known he leads the Christian host, the Saracens fly without giving battle, and cannot be lured into the field to face him."

"In God's name, then," cried the irate Count, "why doesn't he take Palestine with his own hand, and return so that he may reduce at least two of his truculent Princes to order and some respect for him? Germany is languishing for a ruler of such prowess. Told you the Archbishops of all this?"

"I did, my Lord."

"And what said they?"

"They prayed that he might be long spared to perform such deeds in the Holy Land, and are about to offer Mass in honour of his victories over the heathen."

"I can well believe it. If masses will keep him in the East he will never return to Germany. I have no patience with such old wives' tales."

The Count rose from his bench and strode from the room, saying to Steinmetz as he departed:

"See that this relator of fables is carefully deposited outside the walls in the way he came, and allow no loitering in the courtyard."

"My Lord," cried Rodolph as the Count approached the door, "I wish to have some converse with the good Father alone, and I desire to offer him refreshment before he departs from us. Have I your sanction?"

The Black Count paused near the door and looked back at the assemblage before answering. Then he said:

"Captain Steinmetz, you will obey his Lordship's orders as faithfully as if they came from me."

With this command he withdrew from the room. The ladies also rose and bent their heads to receive the blessing of the monk, thanking him for what he

had told them, and expressing a wish that this should not be his last visit to the castle.

Refreshments were placed on the table, to which the monk, on being invited, devoted himself with right good will. Rodolph requested Captain Steinmetz to leave them alone together.

"Are you the only messenger Baron von Brunfels sends forth from Frankfort?" asked Rodolph.

"No, my Lord, there are many of us. One goes east, another west, and so in all directions. It is the desire of Baron von Brunfels that the people know as speedily as possible of the deeds done by their brave Emperor."

"A most loyal and laudable intention, which will be well carried out if all the messengers are as faithful and competent as you are, Father. Do you return instantly to Frankfort?"

"No, my Lord. I go now up the Moselle to Treves, and so back in a southerly direction to the capital."

"I ask you, then, to change your plans, and return forthwith to Frankfort."

"'Twould be contrary to the orders of my Lord of Brunfels. I dare not disobey him."

"Nevertheless, I request you to do so, and I give you my assurance that you will be the most welcome visitor the Baron has received this many a day, and that he himself will tell you so, blessing you for your disobedience."

"If the news you have to send is so important to him, I might venture to change my route, but as I shall have to suffer if a mistake is made, while you are safe in this castle, I must judge of the importance of your message by hearing it."

"Friendship lends importance to tidings that may seem trivial to a stranger. The Baron is my most intimate friend, therefore I ask of you to remember carefully and relate accurately what I have to send him. Tell him the silk merchant whom he accompanied to Treves is well, and is now in Castle Thuron."

"I carry not news of silk merchants, but of Emperors," cried the monk resentfully, for, despite his calling, even his humility was offended by the sudden descent from the highest to the lowest, in a country where rank was so greatly esteemed.

"Remember, Father, that the founder of our Holy Church was the son of a carpenter."

"He was the Son of God."

"Most true, but reputed to be what I say, and his Apostles were poor fishermen. Therefore it may well be that when you carry news of a silk merchant you are no less ignoble a messenger than when you carry news of an Emperor. Tell the Baron the silk merchant sends him greeting, and asks him to persevere in the augmenting of the army, which the silk merchant hopes will, from its very strength and efficiency, prove to be, not an engine of war, but an assurance of peace. To be thus effective, however, it must be undeniably stronger than any forces that may combine against it. Say that the West and the North have combined, which fact he probably already knows. The Baron is, therefore, not to interfere in any struggle that may be going on, but rather to keep a close watch upon it, and to have everything ready when a command is sent him. Have you given strict heed to my message, good Father? Repeat it to me."

"Baron von Brunfels is to be made aware that the silk merchant who accompanied him to Treves is at present in Castle Thuron. The army is to be increased and made more efficient. The West and the North have combined, which I take to mean, that Europe is as one against the Saracen, and that the Emperor's army is to be made stronger than the combination, so that when he gives the command, he will be at the head of a force superior to all others sent out, and may thus bring the war to an end without further blood being shed, through the mere terror of his name, supplemented by an army so redoubtable."

"I beg you to colour not your message with your own explanations but to attend more strictly to the

exact words I give you. Say that when further news of the Emperor comes to him, he is to send you again to Castle Thuron, and he may give you instructions that will be for my ear alone. You will, therefore, be careful, if you value the good opinion of the Baron, to keep strictly apart the message for me and the general intelligence which you recite to the Archbishops. Say that the silk merchant is in safe quarters, and thinks it better to make no premature attempt to leave Thuron. The main thing at present is to get together as many troops as will outnumber two to one the forces of the West and the North. All this is not done in a day. Do you go back to the Archbishops?"

"No, my Lord. I intended to journey up the Moselle."

"Are you afoot?"

"The Baron von Brunfels, wishing me speed, gave me a horse, to which I am only now becoming accustomed. I left it at the village below in care of a soldier, it being my intention to travel to-night to the valley of the Brodenbach, and rest at the castle of Ehrenburg."

"Ehrenburg can wait for its news of the Emperor. Go, therefore, up the Brodenbach valley as was your first determination, but continue on past the castle until you come to the Frankfort road. Rest then if you must, but know that the sooner you reach Frankfort the better will you please the Baron."

Rodolph called to Steinmetz, who again blindfolded the monk, and accompanied by Emperor and captain the Palmer was set once more outside the walls, and disappeared in the night down the hill towards Alken.

CHAPTER XXXII.

“FOR YOUR LOVE I WOULD DEFY FATE.”

THE Countess Tekla spent the greater portion of her time waiting upon her aunt, who, never having known a true friend in her life before, clung to the girl with a pathetic insistence, unhappy if Tekla was out of her sight. The natural positions of the two seemed reversed; the elder woman leaning dependently on the younger, and looking to her for protection, as a child looks to its mother. When Tekla was busy in the courtyard garden her aunt would sit on the balcony and watch her every movement with a dumb, tender affection that was most touching. The elder rarely spoke, and never smiled except when Tekla looked up to her with a smile on her own pretty lips.

Rodolph often wished the aunt were not quite so much the shadow of the niece, but there was such love between the two women that he never ventured to suggest to Tekla his hope that he might be permitted now and then to enjoy her companionship unshared. He worked with her in the garden, and often said that he expected to make horticulture his occupation when the siege was over, so expert had he become under the charming instruction of his fair teacher.

When winter intervened, and the spring came again, Rodolph jokingly suggested that they should plant grain instead of flowers, as there was still no sign that the Archbishops were becoming tired of their undertaking. The second winter passed, and a second spring found the living line around the castle still intact, thus Rodolph's former jest began to take a grimmer meaning, for provisions were indeed running low, and the two years' supply, which seemed at first al-

most inexhaustible, was now coming to an end, yet not a pound of wheat or a gallon of wine had succeeded in getting through the cordon drawn by the stubborn Archbishops. Rodolph had counted on a quarrel between the two commanders ere this, but there was no indication of dissension in the opposing camp. The bitter persistence of the siege he laid to the account of the Archbishop of Treves, and in this he was right. There was, however, one grain of consolation in its continuance ; so long as the armies of the Archbishops were encircling Thuron, they were out of mischief elsewhere, and the rest of Germany was at peace. Rodolph could not help thinking that if it came to a fight the troops would hardly be as warlike as they had shown themselves two years before, when the siege began, for the sound of revelry came up each night from the camp, and the idle men were industriously drinking their thousand gallons of wine each day, which tended more to hilarity than discipline. Nevertheless, they held tightly to the castle, and there was no relaxing of the lines that surrounded it. On several occasions attempts were made to get through by one or other belonging to the garrison, but in each case without success. The deserters were turned back, the officers refusing even to make prisoners of them.

Meanwhile the Emperor periodically received news from the capital, and was compelled also to listen to long-winded mythical accounts of his own bravery in the East, which did much credit to the fictional power of the romancer in Frankfort who put the stories together. When at last it was reported to him that the army centred in Frankfort, and at other points within easy call of the capital, was fit to cope successfully with all opposition, the Emperor resolved to quit the castle by stealth if possible, and if that proved impracticable, to send word when next the monk came, telling Brunfels to lead the army in person up the Moselle and raise the siege of Thuron. His hope, however, was to get away from the castle and

himself give the command to the Archbishops to cease their warfare.

But another matter occupied his mind, almost to the exclusion of the great affairs of state, which should perhaps have had his undivided attention, because of their paramount importance. This interest held him a willing prisoner in Thuron, and it may be some excuse for his inaction—for his reluctance in showing himself a real and not a nominal Emperor—that he was less than thirty years of age. Before he quitted Thuron, therefore, he desired to know whether the Countess Tekla regarded him as a dear friend or a dearer lover. It was his right to come at the head of his army and demand the girl, for even if she had, when sorely pressed, rebelled against being bestowed upon an equal in rank and wealth in the person of Count Bertrich, yet, whatever her personal inclinations might be, she could not deny the suit of the Emperor, were he as ugly as Calaban, as old as Methuselah, and as wicked as Beelzebub. Such a refusal would have been unheard of under the feudal law, and would certainly not have been allowed by the upholders of it. But Rodolph was in the mind to keep all prerogatives of his position for other purposes, and trust to his own qualities in pursuing the course that Cupid had marked out for him. If the girl cared nothing for him as Lord Rodolph, he would not ask her to bestow her affection upon the Emperor.

The moon was shining brightly over the Moselle valley when he determined to escape from the castle, and as he had resolved to take the archer and Conrad with him, not only as a bodyguard, but in order that there might be less demand on the almost empty larder of the castle, he had to wait for a night when the moon was obscured, or until it grew older and rose later. It would be impossible for the three of them to get away when night was as light as day; indeed experience had proved the futility of even one attempting to quit the stronghold; but the Emperor was imbued with the belief that he could succeed

where others had failed. The archer had formulated a plan for their escape in conjunction with his friend Roger Kent, who was now on guard at a portion of the line in the Thaurand valley after midnight, and although Surrey had had as yet no chance of consulting his friend, he surmised there would be little difficulty in persuading him to turn a blind eye and a deaf ear up the valley for a few minutes to accommodate an old comrade.

Things were at this pass when, one afternoon, Rodolph was with the Countess Tekla in the garden while the girl's aunt sat on the balcony watching them.

"My Lady," said Rodolph, in a low voice, "I have serious complaint to make of you."

"Of me, my Lord," asked the girl, in surprise, glancing swiftly up at him.

"Yes, Countess. While we have each, even to Count Heinrich himself, taken turns in keeping watch and ward on the battlements, you have never shouldered pike and marched up and down the promenade. Yet is there reason for that. Your doing so would attract rather than repel the enemy, so perhaps we were wise in allowing you to work in the garden instead. Still, you should at least encourage those on guard, and as this promises to be a beautiful night, and as I pace the battlements until the stroke of twelve, I beg of you to come upon the parapet soon after our evening meal and bear me company for an hour or so. I make it a question of duty, if I cannot persuade you else."

"I am not one to shirk from duty," said the Countess, brightly, "so upon that basis will I assist you to repel the invaders. Besides, I wish to see the valley bathed in the moonlight, and have long desired to venture on the battlements, and would have done so before now had not my uncle forbidden it. But that was long since, and perhaps he apprehends no danger at this time."

"The ramparts are as safe as the quietest street in Frankfort, and I do assure you that the valley in the

moonlight is most lovely and well worth gazing upon. I may, then, look forward to your coming?"

"Yes, unless my uncle or aunt object."

"They will not object, especially if you do not ask their permission, which I beg you not to do. Just make the venture, and I will guarantee that no one will have aught to say against your presence on the platform of the west wall."

And thus it came about that the Countess Tekla, with a fleecy white scarf thrown over her fair head, reaching down to her waist, looking as if it had been woven from the moonbeams themselves, walked on the stone terrace that night with Lord Rodolph of Hapsburg, and then was the time, had the Archbishops been looking for a favourable opportunity of attack, to charge upon the fortress, for never since the world began was watch so carelessly kept in ancient stronghold, as when these two young people guarded grim Castle Thuron.

"This reminds me of another night," said Rodolph. "The moon shone as brightly, and the river flowed on as peacefully under its mild radiance. Does your recollection join with mine?"

"Yes. It was the night we left Treves."

"Together."

Tekla looked up at him, then gently murmured a repetition of the word.

"It was an idyllic voyage," he continued, "whose remembrance lingers as does the fragrance of a precious flower. Its dangers seem to have faded away, and only the charm remains. The recollection of it is like a beautiful dream: a vision of Heaven rather than an actuality of earth."

The Countess Tekla paused in her walk, and clasping her hands over her breast, gazed up the valley at the winding ribbon of silver far below, the glamour and soft witchery of the moonlight in the lustre of her eyes.

"There can be nothing more beautiful in the world than the Moselle," she said, slowly.

"It is indeed an enchanted river, but that night it looked upon a beauty superior to its own."

"I shall not pretend ignorance of your meaning, my Lord, and so take the compliment to myself, undeserving of it though I may be. But my treatment of you then was, I fear, a sad blemish on whatever of beauty I may possess. I see you now standing on the rock by the margin of the stream, to which my petulance and suspicion unwarrantably banished you. I often think of my injustice, pain mingling with pleasure in the remembrance, which is unaccountable, for I should dwell on the incident with regret only, yet it passes my comprehension that I experience felicity in conning it over. You looked like an indignant god of the Moselle, standing there silent in the moonlight, and even although I deeply distrusted you then—you must remember I had not seen you until that moment—I felt as if I were a culprit, refusing to pay just toll as I floated on the river you guarded."

"Ah, Countess, payment deferred makes heavy demand when time for settlement ultimately comes. The river god now asks for toll, with two years' interest, compounded and compounded, due."

"Alas!" cried the Countess, arching her eyebrows, and spreading out her empty hands, accompanying the word with a little nervous laugh, "I fear I am bankrupt. Should this siege succeed, as it seems like to do——"

"What siege, my Lady?"

"The siege of Castle Thuron," she answered, looking sideways at him. "Is there another?"

"I had another in my mind at the moment. I trust that it too will be successful, or rather that it will be successful and the Archbishops' effort fail. But if Thuron falls, what then, my Lady?"

"Then am I bankrupt, for my lands will be confiscated and other grievous things may happen. With lands and castles gone, how can I pay the river god his fee, even were he generous to forego his rightful interest, twice or thrice compounded?"

"The gods, my Lady, traffic not in castles nor in lands. Were these tendered, free of fee or vassalage, your river god would value them no more than the lump of rock he stood upon, and would proclaim to all the Moselle valley his charge was still unsatisfied."

"Then he is no god, but a Frankfort usurer."

"That he is indeed, my Lady; rapacious, exacting, demanding that to which he has no rightful claim, yet still demanding. And worse than any mortgage broker, because he knows no debt has been incurred, but the reverse, for such slight service as he rendered was a pleasure to him, and he knew himself deeply the debtor in that it was accepted of him. And yet, my Lady, this confessed cozening knave implores recompense so far above his merits, that there is this to say in his behalf: his tongue, more modest than his thoughts, hesitates to formulate in words his arrogant petition. I stand here landless and castleless, but I hope a gentleman, and if any man question that I am as noble as the Archbishop himself I will dispute his contention with my sword; brushing aside all thought of the possessions that may come to you or to me, are you content, my Lady Tekla, to place your hand in my empty palm and say, 'Rodolph, I take you for my future husband'?"

He stood with both hands outstretched, and she a little distance from him, her head bowed, once venturing to dart a swift glance at him, again scrutinising the silent stones lying in the moonlight at her feet. Then suddenly she placed both her hands in his, and cried breathlessly:

"Rodolph, Rodolph, it were a foolish bargain for you, and I cannot have it so. Wait, wait a little, till I know whether I have what should be mine; whether I am to be as poor as any village maiden in Alken yonder; then ask me, Rodolph. In either case ask me then, and I will answer you."

"No, Tekla, answer me now—now."

"You are young, Rodolph. Oh, why must I be wise for two?—your way is to make, and I must not retard

your career. You join a tottering house: my only relative cannot hold his own with his single sword. I feel disaster hovering over us, and yet so shallow a maid am I, that I came joyously forth to be with you on this promenade, unheeding of impending calamity. Think what you do, my Lord: the powerful Archbishops are your enemies, and there is no kin of mine to befriend you. Wait, wait, wait."

"I have already waited—for two years have I waited; I want my answer now, Tekla."

"No, no. This madness is of the moonlight. They say the moon, when it shines brightly—our talk of the river spirits has made us blind to practical things, and so I seem to be myself one of the Rhine maidens who lure men on to destruction. I will not be the Lorelei of the Moselle. Let me go, my Lord: I should not have come here to the battlements in the moonlight, for reason has fled from us. You shall not blight your noble career for one so ill-fated as I. See what I have already done. My uncle besieged this two years, and now certain of defeat. You imprisoned here when you should have been making your way in the East, or in Germany, where, with your bravery, your name would have rung throughout the land. I will not embroil you with the Archbishops, and perhaps with the Emperor himself. Go forth, Lord Rodolph, from this doomed house, and come to me, if you still wish, when I shall not retard you."

"My career I shall look to with satisfied mind and heart, if first I have assurance from you that all is well with my love. I have no fears for my future. I willingly stayed my career at a single sight of you, for I came to Treves to see the Archbishop, and not to look upon the Countess Tekla. It seems to me amazing that there ever was a time when I had to say to my comrade, 'Who is she?' yet such was indeed the case, for when I should have been gazing at Arnold von Isenberg, my thoughts and glances were all for the lady who rode by his side. My being in the skiff was no accident, as you thought, but the result of

careful planning, with a craft worthy of Arnold himself. I came here willingly, eagerly, and not through inadvertence, and Thuron never held so complacent a prisoner, nor one who so welcomed captivity as I, less held by its adamantine walls than by your silken bondage, if my glad restraint merit so harsh a name. Tekla, I love you at dawn, at mid-day, in darkness, or in moonlight; all's one to me. How is it with you, my lady of the silver light?"

"Oh, with me, with me, Rodolph, what need to answer that which all may see so plainly? What need for you to ask, when every glance that fell from my eyes upon you must have betrayed me? Oh, my knight of the water-lapped rock, I loved you ever since first I saw you standing there, flinging your abandoned sword at my feet, for the protection of one so cruel and unjust. And now must my foolish fondness drag you down with me into the torrent that may overwhelm us both? Rodolph, Rodolph, I cry to you beware, for I cannot protest longer, and am so selfish that, for your love, I would defy fate; so ungenerous that while my lips warn you my heart hopes you will not heed. Oh, Rodolph, I have loved you since the world began."

The young man, suddenly releasing her imprisoned hands, clasped the girl unresisting to him and on her trembling dewy lips pressed, long and tenderly, their first kiss; she, with a deep sigh, closing her eyes, and resigning herself to his tenderness. For him, no less than for her, the moment was supreme, and it seemed as if the world had faded from them and they stood alone in delirious space together. The tent of the Archbishops, precursor of the great Cathedral, shone white in the moonlight, looking in calm unconsciousness at the plans of its august builders crumbling to pieces, through the action of a man and woman.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

A GRIM INTERRUPTION TO A LOVER'S MEETING.

NOT on the battlements alone did lovers meet. At nearly the same hour of the night after the ill-kept guard on the promenade, Conrad set forth to greet Hilda, as had been his custom for many evenings during the past two years. The girl stole quietly up among the sadly trampled grape vines to a corner of the castle which the two had made their own. There was an angle in the wall under the northern tower which was in darkness whether the moon shone or no, and above this stone alcove, the machicolated wall gave Conrad an opportunity for descent unseen, which would not have been possible from the promenade itself, except on dark nights. Here he placed his rope, and thus he slipped silently down to meet the girl who crept up from the village for the pleasure of holding whispered converse with him. When it had become evident that the castle was to be starved into submission, there was no further talk of Hilda returning to her old service. The girl would at least have plenty to eat in the village, which could not be guaranteed to her in the castle, and although Hilda would have run the risk of starving had she been allowed to return, the Countess herself felt she could not, in justice to those beleaguered with her, allow the tire woman to leave her present lodging.

Of late, although they stood in the shadow, Hilda's sharp eyes noted the ever-increasing gauntness of Conrad, who, like all within the castle, except the two ladies, was placed on short rations, and at last the girl brought up with her, without saving anything, cakes of her own baking from the village, and although at first Conrad thought of sharing his good fortune

with his comrades, reflection showed him that this could not be done without endangering the secret of their rendezvous. Thus their retreat in the secluded embrasure of the silent walls had become a nocturnal picnic, Hilda watching her lover with tender solicitude while he ate, sure for one night at least he should not starve. She begged him to let her come oftener, but he, fearing discovery, would not permit this, for her passing through the lines too frequently might raise suspicion in the camp, where the greatest precautions were taken to permit no supplies to pass the cordon, in which task the besiegers were amazingly successful.

Their time of meeting was early in the evening, while the Count and his household were at their last meal of the day, as at that hour there was less chance of interruption, and there was also the advantage that Hilda could return to Alken before it grew late.

Conrad had finished his welcome repast and the two stood in the darkness together, the gloom perhaps made the more intense because it contrasted so strongly with the sloping hillside flooded with bright moonlight, when Hilda's quick ear, ever on the alert for a sound on the wall above or the earth beneath them, heard a stealthy step, and she whispered suddenly :

"Hush! Some one is approaching along the west side."

They remained breathless a few moments listening, and Conrad was about to say he heard nothing, when round the corner came a muffled stooped figure, which, although it was in darkness itself, stood out like a black silhouette against the moonlit hills opposite. With a thrill of fear Conrad recognised the evil face of Captain Steinmetz, peering with anxious eyes ahead of him, luckily not in their direction, but towards the plantation that clothed the hillside where the vineyard ended. At first he thought the captain had discovered something of the meeting in the corner, but it was soon evident that officer had no suspicion, thinking himself entirely alone.

The two stood there in acute suspense, with Steinmetz before them, almost within touching distance, did Conrad but reach out his hand. While they trembled thus, scarce daring to breathe, they saw emerging from the plantation, two figures, also cloaked, who paused at the edge of the wood, and on the captain giving utterance to a low sibilant sound like the soft hissing of a serpent, the two darted quickly across the band of moonlight and stood beside the captain in the shadow of the great north tower.

"Have you brought the money?" were the first words of Steinmetz, spoken under his breath, but as distinctly heard by Conrad and his companion as by those to whom the remark was addressed.

"We have brought three bags of it, Captain," said the foremost man. "The rest will be given you when the castle is ours."

"But that is not according to the bargain," protested Steinmetz.

"It is according to the command of the Archbishop," replied the other, with a shrug of his shoulders. "His Lordship is under the impression that you can trust him with quite as much faith as he can trust you. If you deal fair and honourably towards us, there will be no fear that you will be cozened out of the rest of the money. If not—well, you will be three weighty bags of gold to the good, but I warn you, there will be little opportunity of enjoying it, for the Archbishop will exact stern interest when the castle ultimately falls, as fall it must."

"A bargain is a bargain," muttered Steinmetz, in no good humour.

"The Archbishop will keep it, and if you stand by your word, the remainder of the money will be paid you to-morrow night. So that is not long to wait, for you will have but small chance of spending it in the interval. Your hesitation gives colour to the Archbishop's suspicions that you intend to play him false. I would I were so sure of as much gold in so short a time, if you mean fair."

"Oh, I mean fair enough, and will take the gold, but I like not this distrust of a man's motives."

"It is remarkable," replied the other, nonchalantly, "that the Archbishop should be suspicious of you. I confess I do not understand it myself, but I am simply the messenger, and merely lay down the orders of my master. Do you take the money?"

"Yes, unless you now say you have forgotten to bring it, and that I must deliver up the castle for nothing, and whistle for payment."

"No; the gold is here. You accept the Archbishop's terms, then?"

"Yes, since it is his will to drive so cautious a bargain."

The other turned to his fellow and took from him three well-filled bags, each about half the size of a man's head, and these he passed to the captain, who concealed them under his cloak. When the folds of the cloak had fallen over and covered the treasure, the ambassador of the Archbishop said:

"What are your final instructions regarding the assault on the castle?"

"I have caused to be removed from the gates the bags of sand and earth, for I have had communication with the Black Count, telling him there is no fear of an attack, and that we must hold ourselves in readiness, before hunger too much weakens us, to open the gates and sally forth to cut our way through the lines, and so escape. In this he agrees with me, and even while I speak the gates are free, and may be opened by any one from the inside. If you have your men in readiness to-morrow night when the bell tolls twelve, taking care to keep them unseen and under cover in the forest before the gates, until about an hour after midnight, when the moon begins to throw the shadow of the wood nearly to the wall, you can approach silently and with caution, when you will find the gates push open at a touch. We change guard at midnight, and it may be half an hour after that time before I will have opportunity to undo the

bars and bolts and leave the gates swinging freely. I shall give orders to the sentinel to keep himself at the end of the battlements near this tower, still it will be as well if you observe caution until you are in the castle. I shall dispose the men-at-arms within so that you need not fear much opposition, for they are at best half starved, and will have little pluck to fight; but it is best to secure at once the body of the Count, who may otherwise rally them and give you more trouble than you look for. With reasonable luck, and all precaution, there need not be a blow struck, but if you bungle and raise a premature alarm, you are like to stir a hornet's nest, unless you secure at once Black Heinrich and the young man Rodolph, who is his lieutenant, and who can fight like the fiend himself. He it was who brought the Countess Tekla from Treves, and I think the Archbishop will be glad to have hold of him, and should give me extra pay for his capture."

Conrad had stood with dropped jaw, listening to this black treachery so calmly enunciated by the captain, whose oath laid it upon him to protect the lives of those he was thus coolly selling for gold. Conrad remained motionless until the reference to the capture of his master was made, then, forgetting where he was and the great need of secrecy, he strode forward before Hilda could restrain him and cried, his voice quivering with anger:

"You traitorous devil! Captain Judas!"

The three men jumped as if the Black Count himself had unexpectedly sprung upon them, each whipping out his sword. Hilda, with a moan, sank almost senseless to the ground at the angle of the walls, where she lay unnoticed. Conrad being unarmed, saw that he would have no chance against three, whose swords were already at his throat, so he sprang aside from the well swung blade of the captain, flung himself on one of the Archbishop's men, and wrested his weapon from him, the other, baffled by the darkness and bewildered by the suddenness of the crisis, was thus unable to come to the assistance of his colleague.

Defending himself from the onslaught of Captain Steinmetz, Conrad raised his voice and shouted :

“ Help! Turn out the guard! Treason! Treason! ”

Along the top of the battlements were heard the hurried footsteps of the sentinel, who cried as he ran :

“ An attack! To arms; to arms! ”

The keen-witted captain saw that not a moment was to be lost, or destruction would fall on him. He turned savagely to the envoys and said :

“ Fly at once. Leave me to deal with this. You must not be seen. ”

The ambassadors, nothing loth to be quit of a situation so unforeseen and so dangerous, fled to the plantation and disappeared. Steinmetz easily parried the blows of Conrad, who was unused to the handling of a sword, and when the sentinel looked over the wall, the captain said, sternly and authoritatively :

“ Cease your foolish shouting. Open the gates and send me here six armed men as quickly as possible. Then come and stand on the wall at this corner. I have other commands for you. ”

“ Shall I call his Lordship the Count? ”

“ No. Obey at once, and attend strictly to what I have said to you. ”

The sentinel departed, trailing his pike behind him. A few moments later the six men with drawn swords came running along the western wall, to the spot where their master was holding off the infuriated Conrad.

“ Seize this traitor, ” cried Steinmetz, “ and gag him! Then conduct him to the courtyard, where he is to be hanged forthwith. Sentinel, search the battlements and find the ladder by which this rascal got out of the fortress. ”

The six men, with their gagged prisoner, now marched back the way they had come, Captain Steinmetz, pleased with his own resourcefulness in a difficult situation, striding after them.

“ Here is the rope dangling from the parapet, ” shouted the sentinel.

"Then bring it with you to the courtyard. I have use for it," cried the captain, over his shoulder.

Hilda, moaning hysterically, yet fearful she would discover herself, crouched along the wall in the shadow, following the cortége marching to the open gates. She was shrewd enough to recognise the fact that if she was to save her lover she must act quickly, and, if possible, get to the Black Count himself, or failing him, to Rodolph. She knew there could be no appeal to Captain Steinmetz, who must kill the witness of his treachery, and that speedily, if he were to save his own head. She slipped in behind the procession before the gates were closed, and kept craftily in the rear of the excited throng who crowded round the prisoner and their captain. She saw the sentinel coming down from the battlements with the fatal rope in his hand, and heard as in a dream the captain telling his indignant followers of their comrade's treachery. Waiting to hear no more the girl ran like a hare, easily unseen, for all attention was being paid to the captain's words, while curses were muttered against the gagged and helpless man, to the main doorway and up the stair, nearly upsetting Surrey, who came out of the great hall with some trenchers in his hand. The Count sat moody at the head of the table, with the others in their usual positions. To their surprise, there burst in upon them a wild, dishevelled, frantic creature, whom, at the moment, none of them recognised.

"Oh, my Lord! My Lord!" she cried; "they are hanging Conrad in the courtyard. Oh, my Lord, save him! Save him!"

The Black Count started up in sudden anger, and roared with an oath:

"What if they are? He deserves it, I doubt not. Get you gone. How dare you come screeching here like a night owl? Take this beldame away to a mad house!" he shouted to the archer, who had entered, anxious to learn what exciting event was going forward.

"It is Hilda! It is Hilda!" cried the Countess Tekla, springing to her feet, and rushing to the frightened girl. "Hilda, what is it? Speak calmly. You are safe here."

"Oh, my Lady, it is Conrad who is in danger. Save him, save him. I cannot talk or it will be too late. Steinmetz is hanging him. The captain sold the castle to the Archbishop, and Conrad saw it done. Therefore he is killing Conrad. Oh, make haste, my Lord."

"What is that?" roared the Black Count. "Steinmetz a traitor? It is a lie!"

"Let us see to it at once, my Lord," said Rodolph, sternly. "The thing does not seem to me so incredible."

Count Heinrich grasped a naked sword, and with it in his hand, strode to the door bareheaded as he was, his great shock of shaggy coal-black hair seeming to bristle in anger. Rodolph, also picking up a sword, quickly followed him. The Count jangled down the stone steps, and, emerging into the courtyard, beheld a striking scene. Notwithstanding the bright moonlight, part of the courtyard was in darkness, and men stood there holding lighted torches above their heads, whose yellow flaring rays mingled strangely with the pure white beams of the moon. The gates were now shut, and the space within the walls was clamorous with excited men, most of whom were gazing upward at a man astride a piece of timber that projected from the castle wall, bidding him make haste. He had the rope between his teeth, and was working his way to the end of the beam, somewhat over-cautious, perhaps fearing a fall on the hard flags beneath. Steinmetz, who shot forth curt commands, palpably nervous with impatience, feeling the necessity for a regular execution before witnesses, yet cursing the inevitable slowness of the proceedings, kept an eye on the doorway, and was thus the first to see the coming of the Black Count, whose mottled face in the glare of the torches looked like a death's head. The captain started, and

clenched and unclenched his hands in an agony of anxiety, yet he knew his master could have no suspicion of the real state of the case, and he counted on his impulse to hang the man first and make inquiry after. It was not the Count's coming he so much feared as that of the man who followed him, for he knew the cool mastery of Lord Rodolph, who would perhaps insist on the ungagging of the prisoner, and the hearing of his version. If then he could get Conrad partly throttled while making explanations to his master, all might yet be well, even were the gag removed, and so after the first spasm of surprise at the unexpected coming of the Black Count, he breathed easier, casting an evil eye on Rodolph, ready to resent his interference, and to inflame the Count against him, if, as he rightly surmised, there was not too great a liking between the two. Conrad swayed slightly from side to side as he stood bound and gagged, the loop of the rope round his neck. His face was ghastly in its pallor, and looked as if life had already left it, the wanness of its appearance being heightened by a trickle of blood which flowed down his chin from the spot where the rude putting in of the gag had cut his lip.

The tall nobleman came forward with martial stride, his men falling into immediate silence as they noticed his presence among them. When he spoke it was with a level calmness for which Rodolph was not prepared, after the outburst that almost immediately preceded it in the hall. The Count looked lowering at his officer, and said :

“What have we here, Captain Steinmetz?”

“A traitor, my Lord. I have, for some time, suspected him, and to-night kept watch upon him. He slipped down the walls by this rope which the sentinel but a few moments since found there. I came upon him trafficking with two emissaries of the Archbishop, and when I called to the sentinel, all three fell upon me. This man himself, when the guards came to my rescue, was fighting with a sword belonging to the Archbishop. My lieutenant here, who disarmed him,

informs me that it is a Treves blade, and he will tell you that he took it from him."

"That is true, my Lord," said the lieutenant, when the Count darted a piercing glance at him.

"In what is this man a traitor, Captain Steinmetz?" next asked the Black Count, still speaking with moderation.

"I heard him agree to deliver up the castle to the Archbishop's troops, letting them come over the wall by the same rope which he had used, while he himself stood sentry, and delivered us up by giving no alarm."

"Why this haste with his execution, Captain Steinmetz? Am I not still Lord of Thuron, with the power of life and death over those within?"

"Yes, my Lord, but if we are to be free from treachery, sharp punishment should fall on the offender. I myself caught him red-handed, and my lieutenant, as he has told you, took from him a traitorous sword of Treves. For less than that, I cut off the head of a better man before the siege began."

"True, so you did. This man has sold us, then? Search him, and let us see at how much we are valued by their august Lordships."

Two men at a nod from the Count fell upon Conrad and brought forth all there was to be found on him, a pitiful handful of small coins. These, at the Count's command, the searchers poured into the huge open palm of his Lordship, who looked closely at the pieces, demanding that a torch be held near him, while he made the examination.

When it was finished the inspector thrust forth his open hand toward the captain, saying:

"This is not traitorous money. Every coin has my own effigy on it, which, if unlovely, is still honest? What say you to that, Captain Steinmetz?"

"My Lord, the money was not paid to him, but promised when the castle was delivered."

"Ah, Captain Steinmetz, there your own good heart deceives you. You know so little of treachery that you think all men equally innocent. That is not

the way of the world, honest Steinmetz, for a traitor is ever a suspicious villain, and demands not a few paltry pieces of silver, but the yellow gold paid in hand. Strike a traitor, Captain Steinmetz, and he jingles with gold."

As the Black Count spoke his voice gradually rose to a tone of such menace that more than one standing near him trembled, and a paleness of apprehension swept over the captain's hardened face. Heinrich, with a sweep of his hand, scattered the coins clattering to the stones, and with the flat of his drawn sword struck the captain quickly, first on one side, then the other. An intense stillness pervaded the courtyard; every man seemed transformed into stone, and stood there motionless, dimly perceiving that something ominous was in the air, yet not understanding the drift of events. As each blow fell, a chink of coins broke the silence. The captain half drew his own sword, and cast a quick glance over his shoulder at the gates.

"The gates are closed, Steinmetz," roared the Count, losing all control of himself in his wild rage. "Lieutenant, see that they are securely barred and guarded. Pikes here! Lower, and surround this traitor."

The lancemen jumped alertly at the word of command, and instantly a bristling array of levelled pikes circled the doomed captain, who, seeing the game was up and escape impossible, folded his arms across his breast and stood there making no outcry.

"Unbind this man. Take the gag from his mouth and the rope from his neck. Now, fellow, is it true that you were outside the walls? What were you doing there?"

Conrad stood speechless, apparently in a dazed condition, looking about him like one in a dream, but when the Emperor spoke kindly to him, he moistened his dry lips, and drew the back of his hand across his chin.

"What did you say?" he asked, turning his eyes upon his master.

"My Lord, the Count, wishes to know if it is true that you were outside the walls, and asks why you were there."

"I went to meet Hilda, who had come up from Alken."

"Then you disobeyed orders, and have deserved the fright you got," broke in the Count. "How came you with a Treves blade?"

"I wrested it from one of the Archbishop's men when the captain fell on me. I tried to defend myself and called for the guard, but when it came it arrested and gagged me."

"What is the truth of this selling of the castle?"

"The captain was to unbar the gates an hour after guard-changing to-morrow night, and the Archbishop's troops were to enter silently. He told them to be certain to secure your Lordship first, otherwise you might rally the men and defeat the soldiers, even though they got inside."

The Black Count almost smiled as he heard this compliment paid him, and he cast a malignant glance at the silent captain.

"Yes," he cried, "the opening of the gates seems more likely than the climbing of the wall. Now search Steinmetz as you searched his prisoner, and let us see what you discover. I think I heard the chime of coin in his neighbourhood."

Without resistance the searchers brought forth the three bags of gold, one of which the Count tore open, pouring the yellow pieces into his palm as he had done with Conrad's silver. His eyes lit up again with the insane frenzy which now and then shone in them, as he gazed down at the coins, on each of which was the head of his old enemy, Arnold von Isenberg. Scattering the money from his hand as if it had suddenly become red hot, he seized the three bags one after another and dashed them in fury on the stones, where they burst, sending the gold like a shower of sparks from a smith's anvil all over the courtyard. Men's eyes glittered at the sight, but such was their

terror of the Black Count that no one moved a muscle as this wealth rolled at their feet.

"Steinmetz," shouted the Count, "draw your sword and cast it on the stones. No man can take it, for none amongst us is so low and vile but he would be contaminated by the touch of it."

Captain Steinmetz drew his sword and flung it ringing at his master's feet. The Count stamped on it near the hilt and shattered the blade like an icicle. Turning to the followers he cried :

"You see this man has sold us. What should be the fate of such a traitor?"

With one voice the men shouted :

"He should be hanged with the rope he designed for the other."

The Count pondered a moment with lowering brows, then said, his face as malignant as that of a demon :

"Not so. My good brother of Treves has bought him, and I am too honest a trader to cheat the holy Archbishop, God bless him, of his purchase. We shall bind our worthy captain and straightway deliver him, as goods duly bargained for, to his owner, von Isenberg. Tear off his cloak and bind him, leaving his legs free that he may walk."

Surprise and delight gleamed in the captain's eyes. Merely to be delivered to the Archbishop of Treves, was getting well out of a predicament he had come to look upon as fatal. In spite of their fear of the master of Thuron, there were murmurs at this unexampled clemency, and Rodolph gave voice to the general feeling.

"I think, my Lord, that his treachery, not to speak of his usage of an innocent man, is inadequately punished by simply handing him over to the Archbishop, who assuredly will not molest him further."

But the Count made no answer. When the elbows of the criminal were securely bound, Heinrich said :

"Lieutenant, select a dozen of your best catapult men as guard to the prisoner. Bring with you the rope and take this Archbishop's man under close

watch to the top of the north tower. Let a torch-bearer precede us. Follow us, my Lord Rodolph, and you, fellow, who came so near to hanging."

When they reached the top of the north tower, Captain Steinmetz, with sudden premonition of his fate, now for the first time cried aloud for mercy, but the Count paid no heed to him. From this tower could best be descried the awful depth of the Thaurand's chasm, made the more terrible by the partial illumination of the moon adding a seeming vastness to the gulf, which the clearer light of day dispelled. The profound and narrow valley appeared gloomy and unfathomable, and on the opposite height above it gleamed the great white tent of the Archbishops.

"Bend back the catapult," commanded the Count.

The stalwart men threw themselves on the levers, and slowly worked back the tremendous arms of the engine, which bent grudgingly, groaning from long disuse. At last the claw-like clutches which held the incurvated beams in place until released by a jerk of the rope, snapped into position, and the catapult men, rising and straightening their backs from the levers, drew hand across perspiring brow.

"Take up the rope," said the Count to Conrad, who with visible reluctance lifted the release rope, and stood holding it.

"Now force this traitor's head between his knees. Double up his legs, and tie him into a ball. The Archbishop must not complain that we deliver goods slovenly."

Steinmetz screamed aloud, and cried that such punishment was inhuman; even the guard hesitated, but an oath from the Black Count and a fierce glare flung about him, put springs into their bodies, and they fell on their late captain, smothering his cries, jamming down his head as they had been directed to do, finally tying him into a bundle that looked like nothing human. The wails of the doomed man in this constrained position would have cried mercy to any less savage than the Count.

"Place him on the catapult."

Two men picked him up and flung him into the jaws of the waiting monster with as little ceremony as if he were a sack of corn.

"Pull the rope, fellow."

Conrad stood motionless, gazing with horror at the furious Count.

"Stop, stop," cried Rodolph. "I protest against this cruelty. It is never your intention to launch him into eternity in such ghastly fashion. This is fiendish torture, not justice."

The Count, with the snarl of a wild beast, sprang forward, seized the rope from Conrad's nerveless fingers, jerked the mechanism loose before any could move to prevent him, and the great beams shot out like the arms of a man swimming. The human bundle was hurled forth into space, giving vent to a long continued shriek, that struck terror into every heart but that of the man who stood with the rope in his hand, his exultant face turned triumphantly upward in the moonlight. The shriek, continually lessening, rose and fell as the victim's head revolved round and round in its course through the air.

The human projectile disappeared long before it reached the earth, and every one stood motionless awaiting the crash which they thought would come to them in the still night air across the valley, but the Count sprang forward, and standing at the parapet, shook his clenched fist toward the sky, filling the valley with a madman's laughter which came echoing back to them from the opposite cliffs, as if there were in the hills a cave full of malignant maniacs.

"There, Arnold von Isenberg," he roared, "the gold is in my courtyard; the merchandise is in your camp."

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE BLACK COUNT'S DEFIANCE.

DURING the two years that the siege lasted, the Archbishops did not remain in their camp on the heights as pertinaciously as their soldiers had to cling to the line around the castle. Konrad von Hochstaden spent much of his time at Cologne and Arnold von Isenberg in Treves. Frequent messengers kept the latter aware that nothing in particular was happening, but the former had no such interest in the progress of the contest, and was content to visit the camp at widely infrequent intervals. The Lord of Cologne became somewhat tired of being reminded by his colleague that the siege, as then conducted, was following the lines laid down by himself, and not those which would better have pleased the more aggressive Lord of Treves. Whenever Konrad, grudging the expense and inconvenience of keeping so many of his men in an occupation so barren of results, grumbled at the fruitlessness of their endeavours, the other called his attention to the fact that this bloodless method of conquest originated not in Treves but in Cologne. All this tended towards irritation, and the communications between the two allies were marked by an acerbity that was as deplorable as it was inevitable.

In reply to the complaints of the Archbishop of Cologne, his friend of Treves advised him to lay the corner-stone of his Cathedral, and progress with its construction, leaving the conduct of the siege to those more eager for war than for the building of churches, but Konrad von Hochstaden held that he could not begin such an edifice while his hands were imbrued

with blood. Arnold replied cynically that in so far as that was concerned his Lordship might go on with his architecture, for the siege was as bloodless as a pilgrimage. When nearly two years had been consumed in sitting before Thuron, the Archbishop of Cologne declared his patience exhausted, and sent a message to Treves with the announcement that he would appear in camp on a certain day and return to Cologne with his men behind him. This message brought Arnold von Isenberg from Treves to the camp some days in advance of his partner, and as he was himself tiring of the contest, he opened negotiations with Captain Steinmetz for the betrayal of the castle. The money was sent on the day that his Lordship of Cologne arrived, and next night, or the night after, at latest, the Archbishop of Treves expected to have the Black Count at his mercy.

The two Princes met that day at dinner, and greeted each other with somewhat distant courtesy. As the meal went on, and the wine flagons were emptied with greater frequency, conversation became less reserved and more emphatic than during the earlier part of the feast. The wine, so far from producing friendliness between the august confederates, had rather an opposite effect, and, as the hum of conversation deepened into one continuous roar, there was an undertone, acrid and ominous, of enmity and distrust. At the long table there were perhaps thirty men on each side. The chair at the head of the board was empty, for such was the jealousy between the two dignitaries that neither would concede to the other the right to sit there if both were present. When either the Archbishop of Treves or his brother of Cologne was in camp alone, he sat in the chair of state at the head of the table, but now one had his place on the right hand side and the other sat facing him. Next to Treves was Count Bertrich, after him the secretary of the Archbishop, then down the table on that side were all the various officers of Treves, according to their rank. In like manner the followers of the Archbishop

of Cologne were placed, and thus there were, fronting each other, two hostile rows of drinking men, theoretically allies. As the wine flowed freely, the assemblage resembled two lines of combatants, who only waited the disappearance of the table from between them to fly at each other's throats. Exception, however, must be made of Arnold von Isenberg himself, whose attitude was coolly and scrupulously correct, and in the heated throng he was the only one who maintained control over voice and gesture; who answered questions quietly and put them with careful moderation of speech. Yet it would have been difficult for an unprejudiced observer to understand thoroughly the motives that actuated the astute Archbishop of Treves, for while his own example had a restraining effect on the impulses of his men, and as a matter of fact on his opponents as well, he would, when matters seemed about to mend, interject some sneering, cutting phrase, all the more unbearable because it was peacefully uttered, sometimes with a glimmer of a smile about his thin lips, that would once more put his brother of Cologne into a towering rage, and thus, while apparently quenching the fire, he was in reality adding fuel to it. When Konrad, goaded beyond endurance by some taunt, gave forcible expression to his anger, Arnold would look across the table at him with a pained and anxious expression, of which child-like innocence seemed the distinguishing characteristic, as if he could not understand what had so grievously disturbed his worthy colleague.

Konrad von Hochstaden drank more than was his custom. He had resolved that night to withdraw his forces, a determination of which he had given Treves full notice, in writing sent by special messenger, but Arnold continued to ignore this communication, and when von Hochstaden endeavoured to bring on a discussion with reference to their approaching severance, the other jauntily waived the subject aside, treating it as if it were a good-natured pleasantry which did not merit serious consideration. Thus rebuffed, the Arch-

bishop of Cologne drank deeply, so that when the time for action came, he would have made up for his natural deficiency of courage by a temporary bravery drawn from the flagon. Arnold, as was his invariable custom, drank sparingly, sipping the wine occasionally rather than drinking it, and thus the two nominal friends, but actual foes, sat in contra-position to each other, the one getting redder and redder in the face and louder and louder in the voice, the other with firm hand on his appetites and even tones in his speech.

"Well," cried Konrad von Hochstaden, raising his flagon aloft, "here's good luck and speedy success to the Archbishop of Treves, in the reducing of the Black Count's castle, now that he is about to set himself to the task alone."

"Thank you," replied Arnold von Isenberg, "if I were indeed alone the siege would soon be ended."

"What mean you by that, my Lord?" asked Cologne, flushing with anger. "Have I then hampered your attack? I wish to God you had said as much two years ago. I was willing enough to withdraw."

"I have never made complaint, my Lord, of your lack of energy in retreat," replied Arnold with a smile and a bow, and a general air of saying the most polite thing that could readily come to a man's tongue.

Konrad, glaring menacingly at his foe, half rose in his place, and put his right hand to the hilt of the sword by his side.

"Now by the three Kings of Cologne—" he cried, but the other interrupted him, saying with gentle suggestion:

"And add the Holy Coat of Treves, in token of our amicable compact. When I swear, which is seldom, so few occasions being worth the effort, I always use the Coat and the Kings in conjunction, as tending towards strength in their union, and as evidence of the loyalty of my partnership with the guardian of the bones of the Magi, presented by Frederick Barbarossa, God rest his soul, to Archbishop von Dassele of Cologne, God rest *his* soul also, something less than

a century ago. You will find great merit, my Lord, in swearing by the combination."

"Our partnership, Arnold of Treves, is at an end, a fact of which I have already formally given you intimation. It is at an end because of continued deceit and treachery in the compact."

"You grieve me deeply by your confession, my Lord, and I am loath to credit anything to your disadvantage, even though the admission come from your own lips. Had another made such charge against you, he should have had to answer personally to me. I hold your honor as dearly as my own."

"I cannot pretend to follow your subtleties. I am an outspoken man, and do not feign friendship where there is none. Confession? Charge against me? I do not know what you mean."

"There are but two to our compact, my Lord. You say there has been treachery in it. There has been none on my part, therefore if truth dwells in your statement, and—I am put in the invidious position of being compelled to believe either that you have been treacherous or that you speak falsely—the deceit must have been practised by you. So I termed your remark a confession, and added in deep humility, that I was slow to believe it. I know of no deceit on your part, as I know of none on my own."

The Archbishop of Cologne stood for a moment staring at his antagonist, then thrusting his half-drawn sword back into its scabbard, he sank again into his seat, and took a long draught from the flagon with shaking hand. Many of his followers drank as deeply as himself, and were clamorous, shouting boisterously when he spoke; but others looked with anxiety towards their leader, fearing an outbreak, the consequences of which no one could foretell.

"You have used deceit, and not I," said the Archbishop of Cologne. "You said this siege would last but a short time, while at the end of two years we are no nearer the possession of the castle than when we began."

"We are two years nearer," replied the Lord of Treves, calmly, "but I made no predictions regarding the length of the siege when it began. The bloodless environment of the castle was your plan, and not mine. I had little belief in your method, and have less now, but I fell in with it to please you, and I regret to find that after two years' constant endeavour to meet your approval, I have apparently failed. But, although I may have hopes of saintship being the reward of my life-long patience and moderation, I have never pretended to the mantle of a prophet; therefore, I hazarded no opinion with reference to the duration of the siege."

"You said Heinrich of Thuron was but imperfectly provisioned; that he did not have time to fill his castle with grain. In that you must admit you were wrong."

"We are fallible creatures, my Lord, which statement I make in all deference, willing instantly to withdraw it, if you object to being placed in a category in which I am compelled to include myself. I formed an opinion of the Black Count's resources from reports brought to me. These reports apparently contained mis-statements; therefore my deductions from them were wrong. In that there was error of judgment, but you spoke of wilful deceit—an entirely different matter, and a mistake on your part for which you are, doubtless, eagerly waiting opportunity to apologise."

"No apology is due from me. In spite of your verbal trickery, I have been deluded and cozened from the first; that I say, and that I adhere to. Still, of what avail is talk——"

"True, true," murmured Arnold, gently. "You were ever a man of action, my Lord."

"I shall be a man of action now; I have been too long quiescent!" cried von Hochstaden, again half-drawing his sword and springing to his feet with a celerity that might not have been expected from one who had had the flagon so constantly under tribute. "I shall now leave this camp and bring with me every

officer and man that is mine. They are as weary of this business as I am, and will be glad to follow. You may then get others to be your dupes."

Count Bertrich, who had with difficulty kept his hot temper in hand during this dialogue, now leaped upright, and flashing out the sword that was by his side, smote the table with the hilt of it, as he shouted :

"My Lord of Cologne, twice you have made a feeble attempt to draw your reluctant weapon; if you had kept your eyes on me you would have seen how easily the trick is done. My over-lord does not choose to chastise you for your insolence to him, but I would have you know there are good blades here ready to meet those of your men, the moment he gives the signal. If you want to appeal to the sword, in God's name have the courage to draw it; if you rest on argument and reason, then keep your seat and address my Lord of Treves with that respect which his position as Prince of the Church demands."

At this wild cheers burst from the men of Treves. Each warrior stood up, and there was a bristling hedge of swords held in the air above their heads. The men of Cologne rose also, but hesitatingly, not actuated by the instantaneous impulse which brought such quick action into play on the other side of the table. The Archbishop of Treves alone remained seated, a cynical smile parting his lips. He raised his hand as if to pronounce benediction, and by a slight motion of it, soothed and quelled the disturbance in a manner almost magical. The swords, seemingly of their own accord, returned to their scabbards, and one by one the wearers seated themselves.

"You see, my Lord," he said, in a low voice, "how quickly a bad example influences those who look on. Your hand to the hilt brought steel into view even before a good half of your own formidable weapon was visible. My trusty captain has asked you, with all a soldier's bluntness, which a champion like yourself will be first to excuse, to be seated. May I, in the utmost humility, associate myself with his desire?"

The sword, alas, has its uses, still it is but a cumbrous instrument at a dinner table. You were speaking, I think, of withdrawing your men, but in the tumult, I fear, I missed your peroration."

Cologne thrust his weapon back into its scabbard, but he nevertheless remained standing.

"If the tongue were a weapon——"

"It is, in a measure."

"—I would grant that you are master of it," said von Hochstaden."

"I thank you for the compliment, and its generosity gives me hope that we are about to come to an amicable understanding."

"We have already come to an understanding, and if you consider it amicable, the better am I pleased. To-night I withdraw my troops."

"And why?"

"The reasons I have already set down in my communication to you at Treves."

"I do not recall them; at least my remembrance is, that on perusing them they did not seem to me to justify a withdrawal. Would you, therefore, for our present enlightenment, recount the most important clauses of your letter?"

"One reason will suffice. I cannot consent to have my troops longer engaged in a futile enterprise."

"Ah, yes. I recollect now that such an excuse for cowardice seemed entirely indefensible."

"For cowardice, my Lord?"

"Call it what you will. I shall not quarrel about terms; withdrawal is, I think, your favourite word. However, to please you, I acted instantly in the matter, and will therefore be in possession of the castle to-morrow night, or, making allowances for accidents, the night following. Accordingly, my Lord, you shall not withdraw your troops, but will enjoy the pleasures of conquest with me."

"You will possess Thuron so soon?"

"Of a surety."

"If you are so certain of that, why did you

not inform me of the prospect, I being an ally of yours?"

"It is not my custom to spread my plans abroad. You were in Cologne, probably most devoutly occupied, and I hesitated to obtrude worldly affairs on your attention. Had you been here, and had you expressed any curiosity in the matter, I should have satisfied it, as I do now."

"Frankly, my Lord, I do not believe you. This is but another of your crafty tricks to keep my men at your beck and call. I have had enough of such foolery, and am not to be again deluded. If this taking of Thuron can be so speedily accomplished now, why was it not done six months or a year ago?"

"I shall charge to the potency of the wine the insinuation made against my probity, and will therefore pass it by. Your method of siege, my Lord, was a plant of slow growth. I have but grafted upon it a little sprig of my own, which is now blossoming and will to-morrow bear fruit: an exceedingly swift maturity. Six months ago, your slow growing stem was not ready to receive a graft; now it is, and there all's said. I therefore count confidently on your co-operation."

"I shall not rob your Lordship of the full glory of success. You shall have no co-operation from me."

"You still do not believe what I say, perhaps?"

"Perhaps."

"I am not given to substantiating my statements, but in this instance, such is my warm friendship for you, I will change an old habit and shortly furnish you with proof. I am momentarily expecting the return of my messengers, and you will hear from their lips that the castle has been bought and paid for, and that it will be in our possession at a given time, perhaps not more than twenty-four hours hence."

"Your messengers will report to you alone, my Lord, for I shall not stay to question them," cried von Hochstaden. "Up, men of Cologne, we have waited here too long. To the North, to the North!"

The Archbishop of Treves, seeing that a crisis had come, leaned forward, and sharply hissed the word, "Swords!"

The single syllable might have been an incantation, so quickly was it acted upon. It was evidently a pre-arranged signal, for the moment it was uttered, every man on the Treves side of the table whipped out his blade, and placed its point at the throat of the man who sat opposite him. None were so drunk as not to know that a single lunge forward on the part of the assailants would cause the simultaneous deaths of the followers of Cologne. Each, sobered by the sudden menace and the presence of a grave danger, sat motionless as if turned to stone. His Lordship of Cologne stood uncertainly, and cast a wavering eye down along the bridge of steel that spanned the table. His serene Lordship of Treves sat in his place, an ill-omened glitter in his piercing eye, while his thin bloodless lips were compressed into a straight line. After an interval of silence he spoke in silky tones:

"I see, my Lord, that it is unnecessary for me to caution your men not to move hand to hilt until some friendly arrangement is come to between you and me. The air has been thick with threats for some time past; it is well that definite action should clear it. How easy would it be for me to give another brief signal and thus end the lives of all your followers in this tent? With you a prisoner, word could be sent to the camp, and your unsuspecting soldiers would be prisoners as well. Thus might I act were I a bloody-minded warrior, but I thank my Maker, and you may well join your thanks with mine, that I am ever a man of peace, rarely using forceful measures except when compelled to do so. Perhaps you will consent to reconsider your decision, my Lord."

"Go on with your treacherous butchery, cut-throat of Treves, and see what good you reap from it."

"It is easy for you, my Lord, to say go on, when your throat is unthreatened, but I grieve for those who must be victims of your stubbornness. In case

you may imagine that the cut-throat of Treves will hesitate when it comes to your own august person, I beg to remind your Lordship that an ancestor of mine slew a predecessor of yours."

"Say murdered, and you will be nearer the mark."

The Archbishop of Treves spread out his hands in conciliatory fashion and, bowing slightly, replied,

"Well, murdered then, if it please you. I am always willing to concede to a disputant his own choice of words."

Von Hochstaden's secretary, standing at his master's elbow, filled with alarm at the threatening aspect of affairs, pleaded in whispers with him to give way, but the prelate, with an angry motion of his hand, waved the subordinate aside, bidding him hold his peace.

The good Ambrose, with uplifted eyes and paled face, prayed that heaven might send peace to that sorely divided camp. Heaven replied in its own way, but in a manner which made the startled occupants of the tent imagine that the prayer had been literally answered. The Archbishop of Cologne was about to speak when there was an impact on the end of the tent which first made it bulge suddenly in, then the cloth ripped with a loud report, and there shot swiftly along the line of swords, sweeping many of them jangling from the hands of their owners, a nondescript bundle that sped hurtling down the table, coming to rest against the heavy chair at the head, with a woeful groan like the rending of a soul from a body; a groan that struck wild terror into every heart, so supernatural did it seem, giving appalling indication that there was yet life in the shapeless heap when it was hurled against the tent. Even the Archbishop of Treves, for the first time that evening, sprang in quick alarm to his feet, as the living projectile dropped from the end of the table into the empty chair, and lay there motionless. The men of Cologne, who had been seated breathless, with the sharp points of the swords at their throats, now took swift advantage of the amazing intervention, and, throwing themselves backwards,

jumped upright, plucked blade from scabbard, and stood at least on equal terms with their foes, but having thus prepared themselves for defence, all remained silent and motionless, awe-struck by the astounding interruption.

Through the tattered rent in the end of the tent came the sound of distant laughter, like the laughter of some fiend suspended in the sky, and then all distinctly heard the words:

“There, Arnold von Isenberg! The gold is in my courtyard; the merchandise is in your camp!”

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE NIGHT ESCAPE OF THE EMPEROR.

WHEN the Black Count had shouted his defiance to the tent of the Archbishop, he stood there in the calm moonlight with his clenched fist raised high above his head, while a deep silence held in thrall all who were on the roof of the northern tower. Suddenly his upstretched hand dropped to his side, and the wild exultation faded from his fiery eyes. He turned, and curtly bidding the others to follow, clanked down the circular stone stair, and presently entered the courtyard he had so recently quitted. All his men there assembled stood motionless as he had left them. The yellow bits of gold lay where they had fallen, no man having had the courage to stoop and pick up a single coin.

Heinrich flashed a contemptuous glance at the scattered metal, and said :

“Lieutenant, see that this trash is gathered up. Give half of it to the honest fellow who discovered the plot, and divide the rest among yourselves. You will take temporary command until I have further investigated this treachery.”

“My Lord,” interrupted Rodolph, “Conrad is my man, and I will myself undertake to compensate him for what he has undergone. I beg of you to divide the Archbishop’s gold entirely among those who have stood so faithfully by the castle. If you give orders to that effect, I would be glad to have a word with you in private.”

“What is done, is done,” replied the Black Count, frowning. “There is little good in further talk about it. I mean with regard to the sending away of the

traitor ; that's past praying for ; the dividing of the gold shall be according to your wish."

"What is done, is done, as you most truly say, and I have no comment to make upon it. If a man is to be killed, and Steinmetz richly merited death, I suppose it matters little how his taking off is accomplished so that it be speedy, and none can complain that he was kept long in suspense. I shall have the honour of following you to the council chamber, my Lord."

The Black Count strode up the stone steps and entered the now deserted room, turning round upon his guest with some apprehension on his brow.

"Well, my Lord," he said, and from his tones had departed all their former truculence.

"I have to ask your permission to leave the castle to-night. The time is ripe for my departure, and I think during the commotion that will inevitably ensue in the enemy's camp after the receipt of your startling message, I may the more surely make my way through the lines. I shall, with as little delay as need be, bring up my own men, and I imagine we will have small difficulty in raising the siege, or at least in getting through to you some necessary provender, if you can but hold out for a few days longer."

"How many men answer to your command?"

"Enough to make their Lordships regret that my followers are thrown in the scale against them."

For a moment an elated gleam of hope lit up the dark eye of the Count, but it soon died away as unbelief in the other's ability to do what he had promised reasserted itself.

"You have been here for two years : your men are now most likely scattered, or may indeed be in the Archbishop's own camp. When the hand of the master is withdrawn, his mercenaries look to themselves!"

"True, my Lord ; but I have been in constant communication with my trusty lieutenant, and he now informs me that everything is ready."

"How can you have been in communication with him?"

"The good monk, my Lord, was my secret messenger."

"Ah! That accounts for his frequent visits, then. Well, go, in God's name, if you think you can benefit us. I trust you all the more because I believe there is one within these walls whom you would wish to see neither harmed nor starved. I am not blind, although I say little."

"You are right, my Lord, and your observation has not misled you. But I would like you to credit this; that even if there were none such, I would gladly come to your aid, on your account as well. I propose to take Conrad and the archer with me, for we may arrive at blows in the getting away, and I wish two followers in whom I have confidence. Besides, the departure of three will relieve, to that extent, the slender resources of the castle. I hope I have your approval of my project."

"Surely, surely. May prosperity attend you, and may I meet you at my own gate with your lancemen at your back. You will be most heartily welcome."

The two shook hands and parted with much cordiality. Rodolph made his way to his room in the tower, followed by Conrad. There they found the archer, seemingly in deep dejection.

"Well," cried Rodolph, "are you returned already? What luck have you had with the poet?"

"Roger is as stubborn as a mule, my Lord, and insists that his oath to the Archbishop will not allow him to let me pass through the lines. A plague on his good principles. I never let my principles interfere with the serving of a friend."

"Is it so, honest John? You would, then, at the request of Roger, allow me to be captured by the Archbishops?"

"Oh, no, my Lord," replied the archer, in astonishment at the bare suggestion. "Not for all the friends that were ever weaned in England would I betray your Lordship."

"I am sure of it. Therefore must we not be too

severe on the poet if he refuses to do for one friend what you would not do for a whole regiment of them. Where is our faithful rhymester on guard?"

"He stands in the valley of the Thaurand, in a most excellent position for our escape, and that is the pity of it, curses on his stubbornness. We could slip through to the stream and either up the opposite hill or along the water course to the Moselle quite unmolested, once we were past the lines. If your honour commands me to do it, I will send an arrow through his unfriendly heart, although I must say I would loosen string with grief and bitterness in my own; then we may pass unchecked."

"No, no. Such a trial shall not be put upon you. The arrow is silent, and if it be necessary we will send it through the heart of another on the line, and step over his body. But it is best to attain our object bloodlessly, if possible, for a man killed may cause the hue and cry to be raised after us. Has Roger no poetry to recite to you? No new verses or changes in the old, regarding which he wishes your sage opinions?"

"Oh, he has plenty of new verse, curse him, but I told him I would not wait to hear, saying I believed him no true poet at all, thus leaving him in deep melancholy, leaning on his bow regardless of the strain upon it, as I bent my way up the hill."

"'Tis a pity author and critic should part in anger. Will you then make your way to him again, taking your bow and a well-filled quiver with you. Apologise for your remarks reflecting on his quality as poet; say your bad temper made you speak, and not your critical judgment. Induce him to recite all that is new in his composition, and also some of the old verses, until you hear my signal on the other side of the valley. Then break his bow so that he may not injure you, and fly to us. During the recital we will steal through as silently as we can, trusting to the poet's fervour of genius for our being unseen and unheard. Win to us then if you can; should this be im-

possible, Conrad and I will have to make our way down the Moselle without you. I will give you an hour to make your peace with the offended Roger, then, when you hear the night bird's cry, know that we are about to steal through the lines. Keep Roger busily engaged without rest until the cry comes to you again from the other side of the valley. If he discover us and is about to give the alarm, I trust that you will let friendship fly to the winds for a short time and promptly throttle him, escaping after, as best you may."

"I will do all I can, even if I have to wring his long neck," said the archer, buckling quiver to his back and taking up his bow. When he had gone Rodolph turned to Conrad.

"Hilda has had a somewhat exciting evening of it, and will be glad to have assurance that you are unhurt. Seek her out, therefore, and bid her farewell for a few days. Ask her, so that you may not be interrupted during your parting, to deliver a message to the Countess Tekla from me. Tell the Countess that I am on the battlements and beg of her indulgence that she meet me there. I value you so highly, Conrad, that I will myself engage the Countess in conversation, so that Hilda may not be called upon by her Ladyship, until your conference is ended. Thus I hope to merit the gratitude of both Hilda and yourself."

"Thank you, my Lord," said Conrad, with a smile, as he departed on his mission.

The young Emperor, his hands clasped behind him, paced up and down the broad promenade in the moonlight. He was now at last on the eve of achievement; about to return to his capital and take his rightful place at the head of the State. An army awaited him, quietly accumulated and efficiently drilled. This huge weapon was ready to his hand to be wielded absolutely as pleased him, for the good or for the evil of his country. The young man pondered gravely on the situation. What would be the result?

Bloodshed and civil war, or peace and prosperity in the land? Would the Archbishops fight when he ordered the siege to be raised, or would they obey his command? Only a few more moonlight nights lay between him and this knowledge. As he meditated on his danger and hopes, the white slender figure of the Countess came up the steps to the promenade, and he rushed forward to meet her with both hands outstretched.

"Ah, Tekla," he said, "it is kind of you to come."

The girl put her hands in his, but there was an expression of concern on her face.

"What has uncle done with Captain Steinmetz?" she asked.

"He was a traitor," said Rodolph, sternly.

"I know, I know, but for long he was in my uncle's service, and he has been these two years one of our defenders. Perhaps, half starved, he succumbed to the temptation of a moment. His years of good faith should not be forgotten at this time. Is he in prison?"

"No. The Black Count bound him and sent him, with a warlike message, to the Archbishop of Treves."

"Oh," cried the girl, much relieved, "I am glad that nothing more severe was done. I feared my uncle, in his just anger, might have acted harshly, but I think you have had a good influence on him, Rodolph. I have noted, with gladness, how he defers to you."

"I suppose we influence more or less all those with whom we come into contact. I should be glad to believe that I had a benign effect upon his conduct, but, before arriving at a definite conclusion in the matter, I shall await further proof of his Lordship's leaning towards clemency and softness of speech."

"What further proof could you wish than the incident to-night? I assure you, and you are yourself very well aware, that two years ago, yes, and often since then, my uncle would have killed Steinmetz on evidence of such treachery."

"I think he would have deserved his fate, Tekla ;

and now I beg of you dismiss the traitor for ever from your mind, and give your unworthy lover some space in your thoughts. I am about to quit the castle, and I ask your good wishes in my venture. I hope shortly to return at the head of my own men, and have some influence on the siege if I have little with your uncle."

"To leave the castle? Does my uncle know?"

"Yes, and he cordially approves my scheme. Furthermore, he has no doubts about my loyalty, for he says he is cognizant of the fact that I leave one within the castle to whom I shall be most eager to return, which is, indeed, the case, my Tekla."

"He knows that also, does he?" replied the girl, blushing, and hiding her blushes on the shoulder of her lover.

Rodolph, bending over and caressing her, undid a knot of ribbon at her throat, kissing the white neck thus laid bare.

"I shall wear your colours on my arm, Tekla, till I return, if you will but tie them there and entangle your good wishes with the knot."

The girl tied the shred of ribbon on his arm, daintily pressing her lips to the knot when it was in place.

"There," she cried, looking up at him with moist and glistening eyes, "that will bring you safely to me; but, Rodolph, you will be careful and not rash. Do not jeopardise your own safety for—for us. I fear your men are but few, and if that is the case, do not, I beg of you, adventure life in a hopeless enterprise. Let us rather surrender and throw ourselves on the mercy of the Archbishop."

"I should scarcely care to trust to his tender heart, but you may be sure I shall use all caution. I think my men will be ample in number for the task I shall set to them, and in any case we will be strong in the justice of our cause and the prayers of our Lady. And now, Tekla, I must be gone and trust myself to the outcome of the night. I hear Conrad approach-

ing with a clumsy noisiness that betokens a desire to deal with others as he would be dealt with himself. His coming shows that the moment of parting is at hand, for another awaits us, and our success depends on our being at our post in the valley at the exact time, so kiss me, my Tekla, before the faithful head of Conrad appears above the battlements."

The kiss and others to supplement it were given and taken.

"We shall always remember these battlements, Rodolph," she whispered to him.

When Conrad at last came, Rodolph and he disappeared over the wall together: Tekla, leaning against the parapet, little as she imagined it, bade farewell for ever to her Knight of the Moselle. It was destined that the next lover she was to meet would be no unknown Lord, but the Emperor of Germany himself.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE FIVE BILLETLESS ARROWS.

THE bowman, with characteristic caution, stole down the hill until he neared the line, wound so tightly round the castle. Here his circumspection redoubled, and, trailing his bow after him, he crawled on hands and knees towards his friend, Roger Kent, who, with bowed head, marched to and fro along his accustomed beat. The poet seemed in a state of blank despondency, but whether on account of the slanders of an unsympathetic world, or for the reason that he had parted in discordant terms from his comrade, John Surrey could not tell. A warble from the forest caused the sentinel to raise his head and peer into the denseness of the thicket. The moon showed his face to be alert and expectant, expressions which changed into a look of joy when the warble was repeated and he saw emerge from the plantation the rotund figure of his friend and critic. The latter motioned him to come out of the moonlight into the shadow, and the unsuspecting Roger, casting a glance round him, seeing the coast clear, approached until the gloom of the wood fell over him, then stood, realising that, after all, the insult had not been of his bestowal, and that etiquette at least demanded from John some verbal amends for his former verbal buffets, if there was to be peace between them.

“Roger,” said John, “I could not sleep until I had told you how sorry I am that my roughness of speech gave you good cause for offence, and I beg you to think no more of my words.”

“What you said,” replied Roger, dolefully, “was no doubt true enough. I have been thinking over

your estimate of my poems, and I fear I have, in my enthusiasm, at various times given you the idea that I held them in high esteem myself; but alas, no one knows better than I what poor trash they are, and I recited them to you that I might profit by your criticism. I cannot find fault with an honest opinion."

"It was not an honest opinion," cried John, fervently. "I was disappointed that you refused to pleasure my master by allowing him to get free of the castle, but he has said that you were quite right to stand by your oath and showed me that, in your place, I would have done the same. Ah, he has a high opinion of poets, my master."

"Has he so? Then am I the more unfortunate that I cannot aid him to escape. I would I had taken the oath with him instead of under the Archbishop, whom I have never seen, but such are the fortunes of war, and one of the many blessings of peace is that then a man is at liberty to do what he will for a friend, as I think I have well set forth in a verse conned over in my mind since you left me, which I shall entitle, 'Peace boweth to Friendship.'"

"Let me hear it, Roger, in token of your forgiveness, for what I said to you a while since was but the reflex of my disappointment, and in no wise an indication of my true mind."

"The verse is but a trivial one at best," said Roger, in a tone of great complacency that rather belied his words, "and is, you must remember, not yet polished as it will be when I indite it on papyrus; still I have to admit that even in its present unfinished shape it contains the germ of what may be an epic. It runs thus——"

And here he repeated the lines sonorously, while his comrade listened with rapt attention beaming on his upturned countenance.

After this felicitous introduction the two sat down together, the sentinel rising now and then to cast a look about him, resolved that even the delights of a discussion upon poesy should not make him neglect

the business he had in hand, but the night was still, with the castle and camp wrapped in equal silence. At last John's quick ear caught the low signal that told him Rodolph and Conrad were waiting to make good their way through the line, broken at this point by a literary conference. John looked sharply at his friend, wondering whether or no he also had heard the sound, but the other babbled serenely on.

"You remember the poems you delivered that night at the foot of the wall long ago, when you so unjustly charged me with being asleep, because, I suppose, your first verses were on 'Sleep?' Recite them again in the order you then arranged them, if you can, and I will tell you whether you have improved the lines or not."

The author rapturously began, and he had no complaint to make regarding his listener's lack of attention. John seemed fascinated, and fixed his eyes on the speaker with a keen inquiry that was most flattering. Never had reciter so absorbed an audience, and the poet went on like one inspired. He glowed with the enthusiasm of his varying themes, and his voice was at times thrilled with the pathos or the tenderness of his changing subjects. Once, indeed, he stopped abruptly in the middle of a quatrain, and whispered, alarmed:

"What was that? A twig snapped; I am sure of it. Did you hear nothing?"

"Nothing, Roger, but the most marvellous lines that ever man was privileged to listen to. Go on, for God's sake, and do not keep me thus deprived of the remainder. What follows: what follows, Roger?"

"Ah, John," cried the poet, beaming upon him, "you have the true feeling for poesy; why was the gift of expression denied you?"

"It is a question I cannot answer, but if I fail to make an arrow, I can judge it rightly when it is made. Perhaps if I were a poet myself I could not so well appreciate the verses with which you delight the world."

"True. I have met other versifiers who were so lacking in all valuation of genius that instead of listening to some of my best efforts they would insist on disturbing me with their own poor doggerel, which was entirely devoid of any just reason for existence. You would hear more of this poem, then?"

"I would not lose a word of it for all the wine between here and Treves. Go on, I beg you, for I never before heard the like of it."

The syllables of the poet flowed like the sweet purling of a stream, and finally, through it all, John's straining ears caught again the signal, but this time from the opposite side of the moonlit Thaurand valley, high up on the hill, which intimated to him that his comrades were at last safe, and that they were making their way across the rocky headland which jutted out between the Thaurand and the Moselle to the north of the spot where the talker and the listener sat, and thus Rodolph and Conrad had avoided the danger of going down the valley and past the end of the village, which was thronged with the Archbishop's men. John Surrey still sat there until he thought his comrades had had time to reach the bank of the river, knowing that then if he were captured or killed, they, at least, would be free from molestation, for it had been arranged that they were to wait but a short time for him, and, on the first symptom of alarm, make the best of their way down the Moselle, with such speed as was possible. Two more poems were recited, and at the end of the last, John Surrey rose and placed his hands on Roger's shoulder, his friend, the poet, rising also.

"If it should so chance, Roger, that I do not live to tell you this again, mark well my last words. The verse you have rhymed to me will live long after our two heads are low, if you can but get them on parchment so that others may read them when we are gone. This is my true belief, for there is something in them that touches me, although I cannot explain why or what it is. I do not think I understand them, yet am

I pleased and soothed to listen to them, for the words run smoothly, the one into the other, like music. This, Roger, is my firm opinion, and perhaps my last, so remember it, and forget my petulance earlier in the night. How many arrows have you, Roger?"

"Arrows? The saints save us! What have arrows to do with poetry, John? I carry five with me each night on guard, but have never yet had use for any. But respecting that last poem, did you notice——"

"Roger, old friend, good-bye."

Saying this with trembling voice, John Surrey leaped down the hillside towards the stream, his stout body ill adapted to the recklessness of his descent, leaving the other standing open-mouthed in amazement, chagrin coming over him with the surmise that all this listening to his verse had been a mere cheat; yet John's last words of praise rang persistently and deliciously convincing in his ears. For a moment he stood thus, then a realisation of his duty burst upon him, and he seized bow, automatically placing an arrow accurately on the string.

Headlong the rotund John plunged downwards, expecting a command to stop, but no cry came. He splashed through the little stream, and knew that in his slow ascent up the steep crumbling hill, the moon would be shining full on his broad back, making him a target that would delight the heart of any archer who ever drew string to ear. He shivered in spite of his courage, in fear of the sudden pang which he himself had so often and so light-heartedly dealt, but the shiver was because his back was toward the danger, and he told himself that he would have faced certain death with equanimity could he but see the missile that was to slay him. He toiled panting up the hill, the ground crumbling under his feet and making progress doubly slow and tiresome, wondering why the shaft did not come. At last there was a swift hum at his right ear like the sharp baritone of an enraged wasp. Into the earth, on a level with his nose, an arrow buried itself up to the feather on its shank. He

almost fancied he felt the sting of it, and his hand went up to his ear without thought on his part. He turned round for one brief moment, and waved his hand to the tall man across the valley, then struggled up as before. The second arrow came as close to his left ear, struck a ledge of rock and glanced out of sight. Still John laboured on and up. After a similar interval had passed and the distant bowman saw he did not intend to stop, the third arrow passed his side, grazing his doublet on a level with his panting heart. The hill seemed steeper and steeper, and John breathed as if his breast would burst, the breath coming hot as steam from his parched throat. He seemed intuitively to know when the next arrow would come, and it came exactly on the moment, not passing him as the others had done, but tearing his doublet and hanging there between the skin and the cloth, yet so far as John could tell in the excitement of the moment not cutting his flesh. He paused, turned, and lying back against the hill, gasped:

“Lord, Roger, what a marksman you are!”

Even his lack of breath could not disguise the admiration in his tone. The tall archer on the further side leaned forward as he saw the other apparently fall, but he made no outcry. There was still one arrow left, and he held it notched on the string. The fugitive lay where he had sunk to the ground, and closed his eyes as he rested, drawing in long draughts of air while his heart beat like the drumming of a partridge's wing. It was but a short distance now to the crest of the ridge, and once over that he was safe, but he was under no delusion that he could reach shelter if the other cared to use his remaining shaft. The belief became fixed in his mind that he would be killed at the last moment, just as he reached the apex, for he knew Roger would not have the heart to slay him sooner. He rose slowly, waved his hand, and set himself resolutely to the remainder of the task. The time passed at which the last arrow should have come, but still the bowman seemed to hesitate. So exhausted

was the climber that he struggled up the last few yards of the terrible ascent on his hands and knees, grovelling like some wild beast, the sweat from his forehead drenching his eyes and blinding him. With a final effort he stood on the ridge, turned round, and in a panic of rapidly accumulated fear was about to precipitate himself down the opposite slope when he was saved the trouble of the effort, for the last arrow rang against his glittering steel cap, the impact flinging him on the loose rubble, half stunned by the blow. Through his brain rang the thought, repeated and repeated:

“Roger has preferred his friend to his oath.”

After a time he began to fear he was really slain, and to convince himself that life was still in him, rose slowly, standing at last on the crest of the ridge, waving his arms. Roger had remained like a statue after his last shaft had sped, his gaze fixed on the spot where his friend had fallen. When he saw that Surrey was indeed alive, he sat down and buried his face in his hands.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE TRAITOR AND HIS PRICE.

OF all those gathered in the large tent, the Archbishop of Treves was the first to realise that the bundle which had so unexpectedly dropped down upon them, as it were, from the skies, was a man. The dismal groan of agony which had marked the sweep of the strange missile along the table, followed by the distant words from the direction of the castle, caused von Isenberg to fear that his envoy had been captured by the Black Count, probably betrayed by the captain, and had thus been flung back defiantly to his master by means of the tower catapult. Whilst the others stood horrified and amazed, crossing themselves devoutly, the Archbishop gave a quick command to Bertrich.

"It is a man, inhumanly bound, and thrown thus to his death. Cut the cords that imprison him. Call hither a physician, although I fear nothing can be done for him."

Two of Bertrich's men lifted the bundle from the chair and placed it on the table. Bertrich himself, drawing a dagger, at once severed the ropes, and the body, of its own accord, relaxed and straightened out, the limbs falling into a natural position after their constraint. To all appearances the man was dead. They turned him over, his ghastly purple face appearing uppermost in view of those who craned their necks to see.

"It is Steinmetz, captain of the castle," said Bertrich, who recognised him.

"The man we bought?"

"Yes, my Lord."

“Ah.” The Archbishop’s interjection was long drawn out. “That explains the words we heard. The mission has been bungled, and probably the envoys are prisoners.”

But as he spoke the physician entered, followed by the envoys themselves, who had just arrived up the hill from their interrupted conference. The physician announced that the man was not dead, but he gave little hope of his recovery after such frightful usage. He did recover, nevertheless, and lived to build the chapel on the Bladenburg, standing exactly where the great tent stood, to mark the spot where he had fallen and had been so miraculously saved, his descent being broken by the tent itself. The Archbishop enriched the traitor, as he enriched all those who served him, whether they were successful or the reverse, and part of this ill-gotten gold Steinmetz expended in the erection of the stone chapel, thus showing gratitude to the saint who had intervened on his behalf in the hour of his direst strait.

The chief of the two envoys told von Isenberg how their meeting with the captain under the walls of the castle had been interrupted. The gold had been given to Steinmetz, they said, and this the Archbishop believed, because he had heard the wild cry of the Black Count.

The Archbishop of Treves turned to his colleague of Cologne, and said:

“This unlooked-for incident may make an entire change in my plans. I must have further information before deciding what I shall do. If Steinmetz lives, and is in his right mind, we shall, for the first time, have accurate tidings of the state of things in the interior of Thuron. It may be that the Count has supplies we know not of; if such is the case, and if you still hold it well to raise the siege, we will then leave this place together, you for Cologne, I for Treves. I trust, my Lord, that you will agree to do nothing definite until we have further consultation with each other.”

"I will so agree," replied the Archbishop of Cologne.

With this the high dignitaries parted for the night, to meet next morning in the conference tent. Day had broken before the unfortunate Steinmetz was able to speak. All his former truculence had departed, and although his bones were whole, thanks to the intercepting tent, his nervous system was shattered, and he seemed but a wreck of the bold soldier he had once been. When brought before the two Archbishops, supported by a man on either side of him, there was alarmed apprehension in his roving eyes, and he started at the slightest sound.

The Archbishop of Treves questioned him gently, speaking in a soothing monotone.

"I surmise that you were thrown hither from the catapult on the north tower. Was that the case?"

The captain bowed and shuddered, making no audible reply.

"Your master, then, discovered that you intended surrendering the castle to me. How did this knowledge come to him?"

Captain Steinmetz moistened his lips and in halting words related what had occurred in the courtyard of the castle.

"The money sent by me has therefore been lost to you?" said the Archbishop, when the recital was finished.

"Yes, my Lord."

"I would like to say that I make the loss mine, and will pay to you the whole sum originally agreed upon, as I am convinced you have done your best to terminate a struggle which, so far as Count Heinrich is concerned, was hopeless from the first. I have some curiosity to know how near starvation is to those within the castle."

Captain Steinmetz hesitated.

"There are two reasons why you may be loath to answer truthfully. The first is loyalty to your late master, but circumstances have caused me to apprehend that this consideration does not press heavily

upon you. The second is that if starvation is within measurable distance, you may imagine that I repent paying good gold for a place shortly to be mine for nothing. It was to remove this impression that I stated to you a moment ago that the stipulated amount will be paid in full, not deducting the coins scattered in the castle yard. Therefore, answer truly: how stands Thuron as regards famine?"

"Famine is now there, my Lord."

"You mean they are already on short rations?"

"We have been on short rations for a long time past. I mean there is not enough food to keep the garrison alive for another ten days."

"You are sure of that?"

"Absolutely sure, my Lord."

"Were you never able to get into the castle even a scant supply from outside our lines?"

"We tried it often enough, but never succeeded."

"Ah," ejaculated the Archbishop with satisfaction; then turning to his Lordship of Cologne, he added:

"That is a compliment to our united forces, my Lord. I like to see a thing well done, when it is attempted, although I confess a more active campaign would have pleased me better. This close blockade, therefore, I look upon as a triumph more personal to yourself, perhaps, than to me."

"I trust my natural humility of mind will keep me from being too proud of it," replied his Lordship of Cologne, in dubious tones.

"You think, then, that Thuron cannot hold out many days longer?" continued Treves, again addressing Steinmetz.

"If the surrounding line is held as tightly as it has been," answered the captain, "Count Heinrich must surrender or starve."

"I see you are exhausted and will question you no more. You may retire."

Captain Steinmetz, assisted by his two supporters, left the Archbishops together. Arnold von Isenberg sat silent in his place, making no comment on the

cross-examination. Conrad von Hochstaden walked up and down the tent with bowed head, absorbed in thought. He was apparently waiting for the Lord of Treves to speak first, but the other sat motionless and speechless, narrowly watching the movements of his reluctant ally.

"I suppose," said von Hochstaden at last, pausing in his promenade, "that you now expect me to remain in co-operation with you until the castle falls."

"I am not sure that I expect anything. I am waiting to hear your views, as all the circumstances of the case are now before you. I admit that I am disappointed over the failure of my latest plan ; still, such is the risk all must run who attempt anything. The man who never fails is the man who never tries."

"If I could be sure this fellow speaks the truth——"

"He does speak the truth."

"How can you know?"

"Because it is not to his interest to tell a lie. He has placed the period of proving his words too near at hand to make dealing with fiction entirely safe. A prophet who sets a day for the fulfilment of his prediction must be either a true seer or a fool. Steinmetz is no fool."

"You think, perhaps, that I should be a fool to stand by you for two years and withdraw when the task is within ten days of completion."

The Archbishop of Treves spread out his hands deprecatingly, and slightly shrugged his shoulders.

"I should hesitate before I ventured to express an opinion in terms so strong as those you have suggested: I wait rather to hear your own judgment, hoping the verdict will be one with which I can cordially and conscientiously agree."

"Very well. It would be an act of folly to withdraw now that we are apparently within sight of the goal. I will, therefore, double the time held to be required, and will remain your faithful ally for twenty days longer. If, at the end of that period, the castle is not in your possession, you will place no obstacle

in the way of my retirement to Cologne. If that does not meet with your approval, then make a proposal to me."

"I agree, and would have agreed had you placed the limit at ten days, so confident am I that the garrison of Thuron are at this moment in the direst straits. If unforeseen circumstances make it necessary for you to retire at the end of twenty days, I also will retire at the same time, and thus we will share defeat as we would have shared victory. Meanwhile, I suggest that until the twenty days have expired, it is necessary for both you and me to remain in this camp, for the castle may fall at any moment, and I desire that we march through its gates together, and raise the flag of Cologne on one tower and the flag of Treves on the other. I trust there is nothing impending that will make your return to Cologne, during this time, imperative?"

"No. It is not necessary for me to be in Cologne until the middle of August. I have set the fourteenth of that month as the day on which the corner stone of my cathedral is to be laid, and I wish to have my hands free of blood and myself free from feud before then, so that God's blessing may rest on the edifice."

"Such a condition is most exemplary and most necessary," said the Archbishop of Treves, with some suspicion of a sneer in his tone. "I make no doubt but your cathedral will be a beautiful building, and thrice blessed in the admitted sanctity of its founder. Well; we shall have ample time for the cleansing of hands before the fourteenth, not that there has been much blood to smear them for the past two years, but if your mind is ill at ease, I shall be happy, in the interests of good architecture, to be your confessor, and send you to the laying of the foundation stone fully absolved. It is then agreed that for twenty days we remain partners."

Thus the two Archbishops concluded their bargain, thinking perhaps of many events that might intervene

between their hope and its realisation, but giving no thought to the real thunder-cloud that had been gathering so long to the south of them, and having no knowledge of a young man at that moment making his way through the forest to the east of the Rhine, his face set direct for Frankfort.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE INCOGNITO FALLS.

JOHN SURREY, the archer, stumbled wearily down the crumbling shale of the steep hill, guided by the low signal cry that sounded at intervals from the edge of the Moselle. He found, on arriving breathless at the river, that Conrad had secured a boat, which, pole in hand, he held against the bank while Rodolph stood on shore impatiently awaiting the coming of his henchman. They were too near Alken for any conversation to take place, and the moment Surrey arrived, the Emperor stepped into the skiff, motioning the archer to follow. Conrad pushed the boat away from the bank, and standing upright, poled it down stream, keeping close to the southern shore, so as to be in the deep shadow of the hills. There was, however, little need for extreme caution. The whole attention of the besieging forces was concentrated in keeping intact the line around the castle, and no thought was given to what was passing outside that circle. The contest had been going on so long that the country had come to look upon it as the natural condition of the locality, and ordinary traffic up and down the river went to and fro as usual. Three men were therefore unlikely to attract much attention merely because they were floating along the stream to that great thoroughfare of commerce, the lordly Rhine. The distance to Coblenz being slightly more than four leagues, and the current tolerably swift, the Emperor expected to reach the larger river before the day dawned, short as the nights were, and in this he was not disappointed. The expedition passed unchallenged into the Rhine, and continued across that

river, coming to land opposite Coblenz. Here the archer, who had slept soundly during the voyage, set out to forage for food, while Conrad, his pouch well filled with the gold of the Archbishop of Treves, a quantity of the coin having been taken for use while they were within his Lordship's sphere of influence, began his search for three riding horses that would carry the party to Frankfort. The purchase was speedily effected, for there was a depot on each side of the river for the sale or hiring of steeds, merchants from Treves going by one bank to Mayence or along the other to Frankfort being the chief customers of these horse dealers. Conrad was instructed to proclaim himself an emissary of the Archbishop of Treves, should he be questioned, and the Emperor rightly anticipated that no one would undertake to molest the minion of so powerful and haughty a Prince. But Rodolph, not being certain what state of feeling existed between the Archbishop of Mayence and his proud brother of Treves, now in active alliance with Cologne, was not so sure that a proclamation of dependence on Treves would serve to protect them further up the river, and so resolved to avoid the Rhine route, striking instead across the country direct to Frankfort, taking as his path the hypotenuse of that huge triangle, at the three extreme points of which stood Frankfort, Mayence, and Coblenz. The distance as the crow flies is scarcely more than seventeen leagues, but Rodolph knew the way would be rough, up hill and down, with numerous streams to ford, and finally the Taurus range to cross, but the course seemed safer than risking detention by the Archbishop of Mayence, or by some stupid, obstinate robber Baron along the banks of the Rhine.

The early dawn was just breaking as, having finished the hastily-prepared meal—the first satisfactory and full repast the archer or Rodolph had enjoyed for some days—the three set off up the Rhine until the Lahn was crossed; then they struck into the pathless forest. At various points they engaged woodmen or

charcoal burners to guide them, dismissing a man when he came to the limit of his local knowledge, and securing another when another was to be found. The legend of that journey remained in the district for many a long day, for each guide, instead of being cast aside with a blow for his trouble, as was the custom of the country, was given a bright gold coin with the effigy of the Archbishop upon it, each piece representing untold wealth to the happy possessor. It came ultimately to be rumoured that it was the Emperor himself who made this golden pilgrimage, and how such rumour had its origin no one can rightly surmise; but, although the tale is devoutly believed by the peasantry, careful historians have proved conclusively that it is a myth, for they show that the Emperor was then returning triumphantly from the Holy Land, and consequently must have approached Frankfort from the east, and not from the north.

When the sun was at its highest altitude the party halted and rested for two hours or more in a rude hamlet on the borders of a stream in the depths of the forest; there they had their second meal, afterwards proceeding on their journey. Having secured a guide in the village, Rodolph was anxious to reach the foot of the Taurus mountains before night, for there he was confident they would come on the Roman road that led over the range directly into Frankfort. This they accomplished, and once they were on the road all fear of losing their way left them. It had now become merely a question of endurance so far as the horses were concerned. Conrad made no complaint, doing all that was required of him without grumbling, apparently untouched by fatigue; but the two years of inactivity in the castle had left the stout archer, never a good horseman, entirely unprepared for such exercise. He besought his master to rest for the night at the foot of the Taurus and continue their expedition in the morning.

“I know something of cities, my Lord,” he said, “and have been present at the taking of many. We

will not be allowed within the gates to-night even if we reach the walls. Therefore will it be useless for us to proceed further, for our horses are well nigh exhausted as it is, and no wonder, for the poor brutes have come through more to-day than any animal should be called upon to endure in such space of time. Besides, as I have said, the gates will be closed and you could not get in were you the Archbishop himself."

"We shall be the readier to enter in the morning," answered Rodolph sleepily, drowsing by the fire on which their supper was being prepared.

"But, my Lord, outside the walls there are usually gathered rough characters,—Egyptians and cut-throats, who, for the sake of one of our gold pieces, will murder us all without compunction and with but small chance of being punished for it, not that punishment would matter to us who lay there robbed with our throats sundered. Here we may sleep safe, but a man's life is not worth a broken arrow outside the walls of Frankfort in the night time with the gates closed."

"I know Frankfort well, having being a resident of the city, so it is unlikely you can give me information regarding it. You must not forget that while we eat freely here our comrades in Thuron starve; therefore, we reach Frankfort sometime between now and dawn, the sooner to dispatch sustenance and help to our friends, if it prove to be in our power to send them aid."

"Oh, I am as anxious as any can be to send help to Thuron, and food as well, but nothing can be done in a sleeping city, and, if we are ourselves killed in our hurry, that will be small comfort to the Black Count and those with him. I am for making haste with caution."

"If you are tired, my good archer, have the courage to admit it, and then rest you here, to follow when your convenience suits."

"I am not tired, at least not more so than a man

may without shame confess, who has come such a heathenish journey; but I see not the use of such eagerness to reach a city that will be sound asleep when we get there."

"Then we will awaken it, and so we may consider the discussion ended."

With many groans the archer got him on his patient horse again, and during the journey tried various devices to make travelling easier for himself. He sat sideways on the animal, with his feet dangling now on the right and now on the left. Then he tried to lie down but nearly fell off; then he sat with face to the rear, but this brought no amelioration. At last he rolled himself to the ground and swore he would walk the rest of the distance; indeed it was easy to keep pace with the jaded beasts who were now mounting the steep acclivity that leads to the heights of the range. At the summit the moon shone full on the wide plain below, and the Emperor almost persuaded himself that he saw the ancient city of Frankfort. They passed, with some caution, the stronghold of Konigstein, frowning down upon them in the moonlight, looking like a castle of white marble, and the Emperor breathed a sigh of relief when it was well in the rear with the trio still unmolested.

When at length the north gate of the capital was reached they found it in truth barred against them, as the archer had so confidently predicted. Rodolph rapped thrice upon it with the hilt of his sword.

"You might as well try to hammer down the wall," said a figure that rose out of the shadow. "They will not open. We have tried it."

"It is folly to open to any chance comer in a fortified town," grumbled the archer. "I knew well how it would be."

But as he spoke three raps were heard on the inner side of the gate, which Rodolph immediately answered with two, whereupon a small door at the side was opened slightly, and a voice asked:

"Who knocks?"

"The silk merchant," answered Rodolph.

"Travelling from where?"

"Travelling from Treves."

At once the small gate was closed and the bolts drawn from the larger leaves, which were then slowly swung apart.

A crowd had rapidly gathered at the sound of the blows on the gate, and now tried to press through, but two soldiers with pikes beat them back. When Conrad and the archer had followed their master, the gates were closed and barred again. The three horsemen found themselves under a dark echoing archway of stone, from the black mouth of which was given a view of a narrow moonlit street.

"You have a guide here for me?" said Rodolph.

"Yes, my Lord. He is to take you to the Golden Flagon."

"That is right. Let him lead on at once, for we have had a long journey."

A soldier stepped out into the light and the three followed him. He led them through the narrow winding streets of the city, flanked by tall houses whose overhanging gables caused the thoroughfares to seem more cramped than they actually were. At last he came to a street so much wider than the others that it might have been termed a square, and on one side of it stood the hostelry, from whose front the golden flagon swung in token of the good wine to be had within. Here all was silent, and the three horsemen sat where they were, while the soldier hammered with the end of his pike against a door. When it was opened there was a whispered colloquy, and then some sleepy stable boys were roused to take charge of the horses of the belated guests, while the landlord himself invited them to enter.

Rodolph swung himself from his exhausted steed, the others following his example; the archer, who had ridden from the summit of the Taurus, descending with painful slowness and extreme care.

"Take supper here," said Rodolph to his men,

"and then to rest. I am sure you need it. Do not leave this house until I come or send for you. And now good-night."

"Are you not coming in also, my Lord?" asked Conrad, in surprise.

"No. My night's work is just beginning."

"Then I shall go with you, my Lord."

"No. Rest now, for I may need you early in the morning. Soldier, you are to be my guide for a short distance farther."

The soldier bowed and apparently needed no further instruction, for he led Rodolph through his capital until at length they came to a small portal at the rear of the Emperor's palace.

"This is the place, my Lord," he said, resting pike on butt and standing in attitude of attention.

Rodolph knocked thrice against the door, which signal was answered as it had been at the gate. Again he announced himself as the silk merchant from Treves, and so was admitted. Dismissing the soldier, Rodolph proceeded along a narrow passage and then up a stair into a wider hall. He was now on familiar ground, and walked briskly without hesitation until he approached a wide entrance, outside which two soldiers stood on guard.

The Emperor drew his enveloping cloak more closely about him, for his worn costume was not in such condition as befitted a monarch, but the ample cloak covered its defects. The soldiers saluted and Rodolph passed between them into a large ante-chamber, in which, late as it was, a number of officers and messengers sat on benches round the walls, while a group of the higher ranks stood talking together in low tones. The room of Baron von Brunfels was beyond, and at the communication between the two apartments heavy crimson curtains of great thickness hung, their tasseled fringes spreading over the floor. Here two soldiers also stood, fully armed. On the entrance of the Emperor all who were seated sprang instantly to their feet, making low obeisance, which

his Majesty acknowledged with an inclination of the head.

"Is Baron von Brunfels within?" asked Rodolph, addressing the senior General.

"Yes, your Majesty."

"Alone?"

"Yes, your Majesty."

"I will enter unannounced."

The heavy curtain was held back for him, and the Emperor passed through. So thick were the walls that the recess between the outer and inner curtains might almost itself be termed a small apartment. Motioning away the attendant, who would have drawn back the inner curtains also, the Emperor himself drew them aside and entered.

At a large table, littered with documents and lit by a small Roman lamp, sat a haggard, careworn man, at whom Rodolph had to look twice or thrice before he recognised his faithful servitor and firm and loyal friend, Baron von Brunfels. His dark hair had become sprinkled with grey since Rodolph last saw him, and as the Emperor stood motionless with his back against the crimson hangings the great love he felt for the man lit up his eyes, while remembrance of the anxiety he must have caused the Baron by an abrupt and long unexplained disappearance gave Rodolph a thrill of pain. He had never before realised what that disappearance had meant for Baron von Brunfels. Although there was no sound in the room, the Baron looked suddenly up, craned forward and peered across the table, gazing with startled anxiety into the comparative darkness at the other end of the room. The Emperor, with clanking spurs, took a rapid step or two forward.

"Rodolph!" cried Brunfels, in a husky undertone, springing to his feet. He seemed about to advance, but something failed within him, and he leaned heavily against the table, crying, with a sob in his voice:

"I thank God! I thank God!"

The young Emperor strode quickly to his friend,

his hands upraised, and brought them down on the shoulders of the Baron, whom he drew towards him in a cordial embrace.

"My old friend," he said, repressing with difficulty the emotion that threatened to overmaster him. "My dear old friend, you are not more glad to see me than I am to see you. But I have brought an insistent personage with me other than Rodolph, and he clamours for attention."

"He! Whom?" replied the Baron, looking about him with apprehension, fearing that his friendly greeting might have had a witness, and that thus unwittingly he had embarrassed his sovereign.

"The Emperor is here, Brunfels, with weighty matters on his mind that will permit of no delay. The Emperor has at last arrived; I doubt if you have ever met him before."

"He will have most cordial welcome and support from me."

"He counts upon you, as on no other in the world. How many men have you encamped on the Rhine?"

"Forty thousand, your Majesty."

"Above or below Mayence?"

"Above. I thought it well not to pass Mayence until I received your Majesty's definite order."

"You were right. They are in divisions of ten thousand men, competently commanded, if I accurately understood your message. Detach ten thousand at once under the commander in whom you have most confidence, and send them along the Roman road to Treves. My officer will announce to whomsoever he finds in command there that I am about to pay a visit of state to his Lordship of Treves, and that my men are to enter and occupy the town until my arrival."

"If they meet opposition are they to attack Treves and capture it?"

"They will not be opposed. They go in the name of the Emperor, the overlord of the Archbishop. If the Archbishop himself is there he will not be so fool-

ish as to oppose the entrance of my troops ; if he is not there I doubt if any subordinate will have the courage to embroil him with his sovereign in his absence. However, if the unexpected happens and my troops are refused admittance, let them encamp quietly on the plain between Treves and Zurlauben until I arrive, not giving battle unless they are themselves attacked. In that case they are to take Treves if they can. Send a horseman at once with these orders, and see that this detachment is away before daybreak if possible. The other three battalions are to proceed immediately down the Rhine to Coblentz. No one on the road will dispute the passage of thirty thousand men, but if opposition takes shape they are to go through to Coblentz at all cost. Reaching Coblentz ten thousand men are to march to Cologne on exactly the same terms as the division that has gone to Treves. The remaining twenty thousand are to halt at Coblentz until we come up with them, although it is likely we shall overtake them before they reach there. Have you a thousand well-mounted men?"

"Five thousand, your Majesty, and more if you need them."

"In the morning, draw up across the square opposite the Palace a thousand picked men. They are to be my bodyguard, and with them I shall ride to Coblentz. I shall ride my best white charger, and I trust my silver armour has not been allowed to rust. I confess, Brunfels, that I am resolved to undertake this initial state journey through my empire with something more of pomp than has been my custom, for although I care as little for the trappings of imperial power as any monk in my realm, yet display is not without its effect on the minds of many, and I have set to myself the task of not only overmastering the two Archbishops but out-dazzling them in splendour as well. We have brute force on our side, which is an argument they have used so often themselves that they will have no difficulty in understanding it when they find it opposed to them ; let us have, then, in addition to that, the gorgeousness which gives decorative effect to power."

Baron von Brunfels glanced shrewdly at his master, a slight smile parting his lips, the first that had come to them for nigh upon two years.

“The splendour has been provided as well as the force, your Majesty. Am I to take it as a fact that the Countess Tekla is within the fortress of Thuron, as has been rumoured? You made no mention of the lady in your messages, and I could only guess that such was the case, because the monk who carried our despatches reported that a lady of marvellous beauty sat at your table.”

The Emperor's eye twinkled as he answered.

“The Countess Tekla is within the walls of Thuron, and before many days, old Brunfels, the Empress Tekla will be within the walls of Frankfort. You will shortly see such a wedding, Baron, in this stately city, that I am sure it will shake your firm resolution to remain a bachelor. She is the divinest maid, Siegfried, that ever trod this earth, and for her sake I will be Emperor in fact as well as in name.”

“The Empress shall command, as she fully merits, our utmost devotion, your Majesty.”

“That is right, old warrior ; get your courtly phrases in train, for I expect we shall have little fighting to interfere with their use. Indeed, I confidently look for the assistance of all three Archbishops at the ceremony, and the especial blessing of the high prelate of Treves. And now, my good Brunfels, see that these orders are carried through without a moment's delay. Give out that the Emperor has returned triumphant from the Holy Land ; this news, once set on its way, will soon spread faster than we can travel. I will now to bed, for I wish to be early on the road to-morrow.”

Baron von Brunfels led the Emperor to a room not far from his own, in which stood a luxuriantly appointed couch, and Rodolph waited no formality, but threw himself on the rich coverlet, booted and spurred as he was. Before his friend could turn away to give effect to the commands bestowed upon him, the Emperor was sound asleep.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

THE EMPEROR AT THE HEAD OF HIS ARMY.

TIRED as John Surrey was when Rodolph left him with Conrad, the archer ordered a meal to be served to them, for he was ever ready to eat heartily. From the table the two travellers went to their well-earned rest, and slumber came to them speedily.

When they awoke in the morning they found the inn in a commotion, and at breakfast the ever-curious archer inquired the cause. The innkeeper himself waited upon them, imagining their quality to be of no common order, in spite of their tattered apparel, for his commands regarding the care he was to take of whomsoever the soldier brought to him in the night or in the day had come from the Palace itself.

"Oh, there is brave news," cried the elated host. "The Emperor is returned from the East, and the town has put on all its finery to welcome him. Flags are flying everywhere, and the whole population is afoot. A great body of horsemen, such as we have never seen in Frankfort before, is drawn up in the Palace Square, and even they are not sufficient to keep the people back. One of my men, who went mad, like all the rest of the town, has just come back from the square and he saw the Emperor himself, and so could not wait, but hurried here to tell us about it. The people made such acclamation that the Emperor came out on the platform which runs along the façade of the Palace, and stood before them. Gottlieb says his Majesty, Heaven shower its blessings upon him, was clad from head to foot in silver armour, and looked like a statue of a stalwart war god. There is a scarlet cross on his breast, which, I doubt not, has

wrought terror in the heart of many a heathen, and there is a purple cloak hanging from his shoulders. Gottlieb says that no man in all Germany may be compared with him, so grand and kinglike he looks. The horsemen, in spite of all discipline, waved their swords in the air, and roared at the top of their voices, while the people raised one continuous shout that we heard plainly where I stand. I hope he has given the Saracens such a thrashing he will not have to turn eastward again in years to come, as trade is ever dull when the Emperor is away. For two years there has been little coming and going, and the Court at Frankfort has been as quiet as if the monarch were dead and they had not elected his successor."

"It must be a gallant show," said the archer, "and if I were not commanded to wait here till my orders come, I would go and see it. Dare we risk it, think you, Conrad?"

"I was told to stay here, and here I stay," answered Conrad, stoutly.

"Tis a good military resolve, and would be commended by all the authorities, but nevertheless I should dearly like to see the Emperor."

"So should I; but unless his Majesty comes to us I see not how we are to go to him."

"There is nothing easier," said their host. "It is said that his Majesty marches shortly through the western gate to review his troops now on the Rhine, for there has lately been a great gathering of them by the river, and his way thither is through this square and past this door. They are even now clearing the road and lining it with armed men. The officer in front has just said that my guests are to be specially favoured, and that a space will be open at my door where you may stand, with none to obstruct your view. I am myself thought much of at Court, although it may sound like boasting to proclaim the fact; nevertheless, when distinguished strangers like yourselves arrive, I have before now received orders to attend to their wants when it is not convenient,

through reasons of state, into which I have no right to inquire, to lodge them at the Palace. And thus I wait upon you myself, which is far from being my custom, though you might think otherwise did I not make the reason plain. I have asked no question of you further than how you like your food prepared and served; but I take you to be men of importance, and, without flattery, I may say of myself that I know a man of quality when I see him, even though his clothes be somewhat the worse for wear."

"In this instance, good host, I fear your shrewdness does you a dis-service if you take us to be aught but what we are—plain, common folk, having no connection either with King or with Court."

"It is, of course, not for me to inquire closely regarding your affairs or your standing in the empire; but what you say to me goes no further, for I am one who meddles not in the doings of others, so long as bills for lodging and eating are duly paid, and, in addition, I am no gossiper, being indeed a man of few words."

"I am but an indifferent talker myself," admitted the archer, "and would have been of more account in the world had I a better conceit of my own merits and possessed the words with which to convey some knowledge of the same to others. But if a belief that we are more worthy of consideration lead you to provide so well for us, as far as meat and drink are concerned, this wine being the best I ever set lips to, in heaven's name, then, persons of quality we are, and so shall we remain while guests of yours."

The landlord chuckled and nodded his head sagely.

"A droop of the eyelids is as good as a wag of the tongue with me, and I fully understand you, though it please you to speak lightly of your own worth. I had no doubt of it from the first, for I knew that common folk are not let through a Frankfort gate at midnight, if their coming is unwelcome to the Court."

"By my favourite Saint," cried the archer, as if an unaccustomed idea had penetrated his not too alert

mind, "there is something in that, Conrad, though it had not occurred to me before. You remember how I dreaded the closed gate, and how the others at the foot of the walls said they could not get through, yet three raps from my Lord's hilt sent bolts flying as if he held a wizard's wand. 'Tis most like my Lord is well known at Court, aye, and well thought of, too."

"That is no news," replied Conrad, quietly. "You yourself heard him tell the Black Count he knew the Emperor."

"True. So I did, but I did not believe it until now."

The increasing shouts had drawn the incurious landlord from the room, and he now returned in high excitement.

"The Emperor comes at the head of his horsemen. There is not a moment to lose, and you will have as good a view of him as though you were one of his followers; better, indeed, than if you were among the troop of horse. But come at once."

Conrad immediately sprang to his feet, but the archer hung back a moment to take another huge mouthful of the black bread and to drain his flagon to the dregs. Then, drawing the back of his hand across his mouth, he followed the others, hastily gulping down his food as he went.

The city had indeed undergone a sudden transformation that well deserved all the landlord's eulogies.

From every window and from every projection of the many-gabled street hung rainbow-coloured lengths of silk or more common cloth. Flags flew from every staff, and cheering men clung perilously to the roofs and eaves of the buildings, or wherever precarious foothold could be found. Opposite the Golden Flagon a dense crowd was massed, but the cleared way led directly past the door of the inn and gave colour to the assertion of the landlord that his hostelry was indeed favoured by the Court. A continuous line of pikemen, standing shoulder to shoulder,

kept back the jubilant throng, whose volleys of acclamation rang upwards and joined the cheers from the house-tops.

The most inspiring sight was the advance of the cavalry, a superb body of men splendidly mounted, who came two and two because of the narrowness of some of the streets, but who, with military precision that betokened accurate drilling, deployed on entering the square, until they marched in ranks of six, the sun glittering on their polished breast-plates, and touching with fire the points of their lances. In front of them came the Emperor and suite, Baron von Brunfels riding by his sovereign's side. The Emperor was mounted on a snow-white charger, and his noble bearing quite justified the unbounded enthusiasm of the people. As the imposing cavalcade approached, the archer with a low cry of amazement clutched the arm of his comrade, while Conrad stared with open mouth at the resplendent monarch.

"My God!" cried John Surrey. "It is Lord Rodolph. How has he dared to impersonate the absent Emperor and befool all these people?"

Conrad was so filled with astonishment at the remarkable spectacle that for the moment he was speechless.

"Can it be he?" continued the more voluble archer, "or has that good wine affected our sight, as it sometimes does. He casts no glance towards us, and seems more stern than ever I saw him, except when he fought the Black Count?"

"Fought the Black Count?" said Conrad, turning to his friend. "When did he do that?"

"Oh, I have gone mad and am talking at random. Can my Lord Rodolph have been really the Emperor, and does that explain the quick opening of the gates and the babble of the landlord? It is as likely as that Lord Rodolph should rashly masquerade as the Emperor in a town where the Emperor must be well known. No. We are dreaming, Conrad, or more drunk than ever before."

"I am neither drunk nor asleep. Lord Rodolph is indeed the Emperor. There beside him is the Baron von Brunfels, my former master in Treves, who asked you to send an arrow through me, and all know the Baron is the Emperor's closest friend."

"I did not recognise him, but then I had no such cause to remember as you had."

An officer rode up to the two and cried out:

"Who are you, fellows, to stand covered when your Emperor passes?"

"E' God, he is no Emperor of mine. I am an Englishman," said the archer, defiantly; but he nevertheless removed his steel cap and stood uncovered, as did Conrad.

The Emperor paused before them, and the procession behind him came to an instant stand. Rodolph with difficulty repressed a smile as he looked down upon his former followers. The officer was about to lay hold of the archer for his truculent reply and his disrespectful behaviour, but Rodolph held up his hand and the other fell back.

"I think," said Rodolph, doubtfully, "I have seen you before."

"In truth, my Lord—that is, your Majesty," replied Surrey, scratching his bare, perplexed head, while he held his steel cap upturned under his other arm, "I am less certain that I ever met your Lordship—again I mean, your Majesty,—before."

"It may be I am mistaken, but you seem to me a silent man, not prone to talk, especially of the affairs of others, and I take you to be an archer from the packet of arrows on your back. I have need of a skilful, modest man, and I possess a regiment of archers awaiting your instruction. Having hoped to meet you again I gave certain commands concerning you, one of which is that my treasurer fill with gold your head piece, which you hold so awkwardly and invitingly; so, see to it that they give you good measure; if they do not, make complaint to me when I return. Still, I give you fair choice, and should you prefer to

ride with me for several days to come, you shall have your wish, if you but give it utterance."

A rueful grimace came over the archer's face at the mention of horsemanship.

"I am well content, my Majesty—I mean your Lord—I will give the regiment the instruction they perhaps need, your Majesty."

"This is the skilful fellow I told you of. Take charge of him and see that he has no cause to be dissatisfied with his change of position."

To Conrad, Baron von Brunfels spoke:

"There is a led horse for you in the baggage train. Mount it and follow us. Come to my tent to-night when we encamp, and you will be fitted with apparel more suited to your new station. I hear a good account of you, and understand it is his Majesty's pleasure that you are to meet great advancement."

Conrad bowed low without reply, and took his place behind the troop, which now without further halt marched through the western gate and thus rapidly on its way, overtaking the foot soldiers of the army before nightfall.

CHAPTER XL.

THE ARCHBISHOPS ENVIRONED WITH A RING OF IRON.

IT would perhaps be wrong to censure the two Archbishops for military neglect in failing to take note of anything that was happening except in the very limited space which was encircled by their combined forces. The siege had gone on for so long that it had become largely a matter for routine. The Emperor was supposed to be in the far East, and their Lordships had been kept continually informed of his valorous doings in that distant region, but even if he had been in his capital it is little likely that the august prelates would have paid much heed to his vicinity, for it had been a long time since the powerful princes who ruled in Treves and Cologne had taken account of the commands, much less the desires, of their nominal overlord at Frankfort. It may seem strange that the news of a largely increased force at the capital had not reached them, but news at best travelled slowly, even when specially sent, and in this case it had to pass through the territory of the Archbishop of Mayence, and he, if he knew what was going on at Frankfort, would not have felt it his duty to communicate the intelligence to one who had been his open enemy, or to the other who had deserted him.

Thus, then, it came about that the first intimation the Archbishops had of impending calamity from outside was the appearance of the soldiers of the Emperor on the plain at the edge of which their camp was set, while other troops were seen marching up the valley of the Moselle. The progress of the newcomers was

so rapid that simultaneous tidings of their approach came from several quarters at once, and before the fourth messenger had told his tale, a final one came from Alken, saying a company had gone up the valley of the Thaurand, and had cut off communication between the camp of their Lordships and the force which was besieging the castle. While the Archbishop of Cologne was listening in wonder to this account of the entirely unexpected advent of an outside army, his more astute brother of Treves at once saw that the camp was surrounded, and remembered that, although his own forces around Thuron might be strong enough to repel the invaders, yet there was no officer among them with sufficient authority to command his troops to fight, unless he had orders to that effect from the Archbishop himself. This situation lent seriousness to the position of their Lordships, who might thus be taken prisoners while their own armies lay idle, almost within calling distance.

“What does this incursion mean?” asked the Archbishop of Cologne, “and what is to be done in the face of it?”

“Neither of these questions can I answer at this moment. It cannot be that his Lordship of Mayence has made common cause with Heinrich of Thuron, and has had the temerity to put this small force against ours, yet our long futile lingering here may have given him a scant respect for us, which is not without a basis of reason.”

They were together in the large tent, and before Konrad von Hochstaden could reply, word was brought that Baron von Brunfels, accompanied by a strong escort, had ridden into camp and demanded audience.

“Ay!” cried the Prince of Treves, “it is Brunfels, then, whom we have to thank for this surprise. The Emperor’s long absence has encouraged him to strike a blow on his own account. He will not be difficult to deal with, for he has no show of right in attacking nobles of higher station than his own, unless by the

Emperor's direct command, and he himself would be the first to counsel his Majesty against so grave a blunder."

"Perhaps the Emperor has sent him such permission."

"It may be, but I doubt it. I remember now that when Brunfels was last in Treves I refused to see him, yet, if he resented that as a rebuff, he has taken long to bring his anger to a heat. He is a cautious man, and a dangerous one. I would much rather meet your friend of Mayence. We will admit him and set conjecture at rest."

When Baron von Brunfels entered, he bowed low to each of the prelates, who returned his salutation with dignified courtesy.

"Your Lordships will pardon me if I plunge at once into my mission without introduction, as the matter with which I am charged is urgent. I am commanded by his Majesty, Rodolph of Hapsburg, Emperor of Germany, to see that an immediate injunction is placed upon the commander of the besieging forces around Thuron, ordering him to permit the passing of food and wine through the lines for the consumption of those in the beleaguered stronghold. The laden horses will presently reach Alken, and it is his Majesty's wish that they proceed to the castle without interruption."

"It is most remarkable that the Emperor should have found occasion to send from the Holy Land instructions so minute regarding the re-victualling of a castle on the Moselle," said the Archbishop of Treves, in his most icy tone. "Am I at fault if I infer that the imperial message has been coloured somewhat during transmission?"

"My Lord, you are evidently not aware that his Majesty is now encamped within less than half a league of this spot. May I urge upon your consideration that there is danger in delay."

"Danger? To whom?"

"I am a plain spoken man, my Lord, and I find

a difficulty in impressing upon you the seriousness of the situation, in terms suitable for me to use in addressing you. His Majesty is at the head of a force which, compared with that under your joint command, is overwhelming. Your camp is at this moment surrounded, and the messenger you send will be compelled to carry a passport from his Majesty before he gets word with your general. I therefore counsel you to make haste in forwarding the message, for, if the convoy reaches your lines before the messenger, it will force its way through to the castle gates, and thus we may have unnecessary bloodshed to deplore."

"Let us have no bloodshed," said the Archbishop of Cologne, speaking for the first time. "If the situation stands as Baron von Brunfels describes it, resistance is useless."

"I assure you such is the case, my Lord of Cologne, and I thank you for your suggestion. I again implore you to give the order I ask for."

"Softly, softly," said the Archbishop of Treves, in his smoothest manner. "This haste appears to me more suspicious than convincing. I must ask to see the Emperor before I can believe so readily that he has returned at a moment so critical."

"The moment is so critical, my Lord, that I ignore your reflection on my truthfulness, and, as regards seeing His Majesty, my next office is to command the immediate attendance of both your Lordships to make explanation satisfactory to him regarding this siege."

"If the Emperor desires explanation from me he may come to my city of Treves and ask for it."

"My Lord, I deeply regret my inability to convince you of the peril in which you stand, and which you insist, to my sorrow, upon augmenting. I would his Majesty had sent one more skilful in the use of words. It is no part of my duty to inform you that Treves is at this moment in the possession of the imperial troops, as also is the city of Cologne. It seems you cannot understand that, for the first time since Fred-

erick Barbarossa, Germany has an emperor. Your angry sovereign I have with difficulty constrained to give you a hearing, and now my mission has failed. Your camp is surrounded, your troops are outnumbered, your cities are taken, yet you stand here wasting the few moments allowed you to show some inclination of obedience, and thus give your friends an opportunity of interceding on your behalf with his Majesty."

"Treves taken?" murmured von Isenberg, like a man speaking in a dream.

"I bid you farewell," continued the emissary of the Emperor, "and return to his Majesty to report the lack of success which has attended my mission."

"Stop! Stop!" cried von Hochstaden. "I will accompany you to the Emperor's headquarters. The siege has been carried on against my will; indeed I should never have engaged in it were it not that I was assured the castle would be delivered to us when we sat down in force before it, and even then I assisted merely to uphold the feudal law which had been violated by Black Heinrich. His Majesty was absent, and I held it but the bare duty of a good vassal to make a stand for rightful authority, when the Emperor was not here to assert his privileges."

The Archbishop of Treves cast one malignant glance of intense hatred at his timorous ally, who was so palpably eager to save himself at the expense of his partner. He scorned, however, to make reply, and remained silent while von Brunfels spoke.

"Such is not the understanding his Majesty has of the beginning of the contest. He is informed that Count Heinrich appealed to his Emperor and yours, yet you immediately attacked the Count, and I, acting for the Emperor in his absence, have received no notice of the appeal, nor have I had any communication with either of you regarding this siege during the two years it has been in progress. I trust you will be able to convince his Majesty that his present view of the case is based on inaccurate information."

“I admit——” began the trembling Archbishop of Cologne, but his colleague interrupted him.

“We admit nothing. We shall wait upon the Emperor together, for in this matter my doughty auxiliary and I stand or fall in company. What has been done has been done after mutual consultations, and with the consent of both. If then we are to be threatened, I ask you to inform his Majesty that we shall appeal direct to the Pope, and I think the young Emperor will be ill-advised to bring on a contest between himself and the Holy Church, for such conflicts have resulted disastrously for monarchs before now, even when they were more firmly seated on their thrones than Rodolph of Hapsburg is on his.”

“My Lord, I am dismayed to find that what I have said has been construed into a threat. Such was not my intention, and I beg you to believe that anything approaching a menace would bring censure on me from his Majesty, and in the launching of it I should be gravely exceeding my commission. Nevertheless, I cannot be blind to the fact that your words bear distinct defiance against his Majesty the Emperor, but as I have myself so far fallen short of my purpose, which was not to intimidate, but to impress upon you the plight in which you stand, I shall forget your words and consider them unsaid, extending to you that merciful construction of your language which I hope you, in turn, will kindly bestow upon me.”

“I ask no consideration from you, my Lord of Brunfels. What I have said, I have said. I shall appeal to the Pope and place myself under his august protection. Any action taken against me is an action against the Holy Church, and the consequences must fall on whose head they may, be it that of Baron or that of Emperor.”

“I the more deeply regret this decision that I have already had communication with his Holiness the Pope upon the matter in question.”

“Ha! With what result?”

“When the siege was begun, I considered it my

duty, in the interest of the absent Emperor, to obtain some decision from the Pope that might be an aid to his Majesty on his return. I sent an envoy to Rome and acquainted his Holiness with the cause of the quarrel, in so far as it was understood by me, informing him that the siege had been entered upon, asking him whether or not the Emperor was to believe that the conduct of your Lordships had the sanction and support of his Holiness. The reply to my message stated that it was impossible for his Holiness to judge who was in the right or who was in the wrong, as he had heard nothing of your Lordships' side of the matter."

"A most just and admirable decision."

"Commendable and cautious, as I thought at the time, but still erring, if anything, on the side of vagueness."

"I cannot permit you to criticise the message of his Holiness in my presence, Baron von Brunfels. The answer was clarity itself."

"The second message undoubtedly was, and perhaps its receipt made me place less than true value on the first. When the siege had continued a year and a half without visible result, I thought it my duty to send another message to the Pope giving him a brief outline of the situation. I said that Count Heinrich apparently held you both powerless. I feared that if you could do nothing against one of the humblest of your vassals, there was little to be expected were you suddenly confronted with the power of the empire. I informed his Holiness that there was now collected in and near the capital a well-drilled force of nearly a hundred thousand men, all animated by the wildest enthusiasm for their Emperor, to whose return they were most impatiently looking forward. I implored his Holiness to give me his view of the case, so that I might be properly equipped for advising his Majesty upon his arrival, saying that I feared the gravest complications, because war had been waged in his Majesty's dominions without his consent, adding

that his Majesty might decide you were rebels caught red-handed, and might, alas, treat you as such."

"Your account did not lack a spice of partizanship and exaggeration."

"I endeavoured to adhere strictly to the truth. The army at Frankfort was larger than I stated, and its numbers were being continually increased. My prediction regarding his Majesty's opinion of the siege has been more than fulfilled."

"No matter. What said his Holiness the Pope?"

"His answer was a marvel of close and accurate reasoning. He said he divided your authority under two heads, namely, the spiritual and the temporal. In one section he assumed responsibility; in the other he disclaimed it. What you did as Archbishop of the Church was his concern; your acts as an elector of the Empire you must answer for to his Majesty, to whom he sent his blessing. He had made inquiry regarding your quarrel with Count Heinrich, and so far as he understood it, no question affecting the Church had arisen. Count Heinrich had been charged with a violation of the Feudal Law, and had therefore appealed to the Emperor, and not to the Pope, as would have been the case had the dispute been ecclesiastical. His Holiness regarded your alliance as a military union between the electors of Treves and Cologne, and not as a spiritual conjunction of the Archbishops of those two cities. The duty then devolved upon the Emperor to deal with the two electors, and if the result unfortunately caused a vacancy in the Archbishoprics of Treves and Cologne, his Holiness would be pleased to appoint to those august offices two prelates who would be *personæ gratæ* to his Majesty."

The Archbishop of Treves remained silent, a deep frown on his brow, his thin lips tightly compressed. During the interesting recital, he glanced darkly and suspiciously at the narrator several times, but he evidently saw no reason to doubt the accuracy of the report, in fact the account bore internal evidence of its correctness, for he knew the cautious nature of the

Pontiff, and was well aware that His Holiness desired to have on the side of the Church the strong and winning hand.

The Archbishop of Cologne, however, was voluble in his praise of the pontifical decision.

"A most able exposition," he cried. "Would that I had heard it when it was delivered. I have been misled and deceived from the first. It was not my wish to continue the siege, and I am here now under coercion. That I can prove to his Majesty, and I beg your intercession, Baron von Brunfels, explaining to his Majesty that I am here, and have been here, against my will. If I had known that his Holiness, the Pope, had given such a decision—an admirable and most excellent laying down of the law—I would at once have withdrawn my men, even if we had to cut our way through all opposition. Pray so inform his Majesty. Why did you not place before us the expression from his Holiness, Baron; then all this difficulty might have been avoided?"

"I had not the honour to serve your Lordships. I acted throughout in the interests of his Majesty, the Emperor, whose vassal I am. May I now for the last time ask you to give me the order I previously requested from you?"

"Surely, surely," cried von Hochstaden, "and that at once. My Lord of Treves, it is your men who compose the line near the village, therefore I beseech you to give the order. I would immediately give it myself," he added, turning to von Brunfels, "but I have little authority in the camp, and I might not be obeyed. If your laden horses will approach the castle from the other side, I will bestow instruction upon my Captain there to permit them to pass."

The Archbishop of Treves looked on in sullen silence and made no observation, but neither did he take the action required of him. A messenger entered breathless with the news that a force flying the imperial flag had broken the line near the village, and that a convoy of burdened animals was now mount-

ing the slope towards the gates of the castle. The Archbishop of Cologne wrung his hands, and, almost on the verge of tears, bemoaned the unfortunate occurrence, calling on Heaven and all present to witness that he was not the cause of it. The impassive mask of the Archbishop of Treves gave no indication regarding the nature of the thoughts that were passing through his mind.

“My Lords,” said von Brunfels impressively, “whoever is to blame, the action I feared has taken place, while we were wasting precious moments in useless talk. The second part of my mission is still to be accomplished, and I wish it a better ending than that which has attended the first. I command you, in the name of the Emperor, to appear together before him at high noon in the royal tent now erected on this plain. You will come prepared to answer truthfully all questions put to you, and his Majesty will listen patiently to whatever explanation you are pleased to offer for your grave infraction of the Feudal Law. I entreat you to believe that nothing but instant and abject submission will be of avail.”

“His Majesty shall have it from me,” earnestly alleged the Archbishop of Cologne.

The Archbishop of Treves made no comment, but gravely inclined his head, as the envoy of the Emperor took his departure.

CHAPTER XLI.

“WHY HAVE YOU DARED TO LEVY WAR?”

LARGE as was the tent of the Archbishops, it could not compare in size or splendour with the imperial pavilion. This canopy was not square like the shelter of their august Lordships, but oval in shape, and over its peaked roof flew the great standard which signified not only that the erection stood on imperial soil, but also indicated the personal presence of the Emperor under its folds. For the time being, that pavilion was the capital of the land. In it were collected the head of the State and his favoured councillors.

At each of the numerous stakes which held in place the many ropes supporting the roof, stood a soldier, his tall weapon perpendicular beside him, and these lances, on whose glittering points the high sun sparkled, formed a palisade around the tent. Approach to the royal pavilion was only possible down a long avenue composed of mounted men, who sat impassive in two extended lines under the hot sun.

The interior of the great tent was hung with priceless tapestries and rich stuffs from the East, which softened the light that came from the sides and roof. At the further end from the entrance was a semi-circular dais, rendered accessible by three steps, and on this platform had been placed, under an awning of purple, a throne, on the apex of the high carved back of which rested a golden crown, a beautiful specimen of the skilled craftsmanship of Nuremburg, where it had been made for the Emperor Henry IV. during his residence in that famous city of the empire. The hard ground which formed the floor of the tent was covered by soft rugs, making noiseless the footfalls of

those within. The Emperor, seated on his throne, had on either hand those high nobles of the realm who had flocked to his standard when the news of his return had spread like wildfire, and who, perhaps because he did not need their help, had made lavish proffers to him of all the forces at their command. These offers he had received with a graciousness that charmed all the would-be givers, and although he declined assistance, he somehow managed to make it felt that this prompt support was most gratifying to him. The nobles were delighted with the reception accorded them, and saw that they had in the Emperor a liege who appreciated their worth; so held themselves proudly, as was their right, for most of them at one time or another had been treated with haughty scorn by those proud and powerful Prelates who for generations had been the real rulers of the country. At the immediate right of the Emperor stood Baron von Brunfels, a man universally esteemed by all who knew him, a stickler for the privileges of his order, and yet the last in the empire who would infringe on the rights of others. During the march down the Rhine, nobles had joined the imperial forces at various points, coming from all quarters, for what purpose they themselves only knew, but apparently with the sole intention of being of service to his Majesty in whatever expedition he was undertaking, the cause of which they could but guess. So much at least was to be gathered from their warm expressions of loyalty, which did not diminish on their viewing the formidable force which his Majesty commanded.

At the Emperor's left hand stood the Archbishop of Mayence, who, on hearing that his Majesty was to pass down the Rhine, had hastily collected his army, and as hastily disbanded it when there marched through his town thirty thousand men, to be followed shortly by the Emperor himself, accompanied by a regiment of horse that alone outnumbered the little company which the Archbishop was able to assemble at the moment.

Thus it was that the Archbishop contented himself by greeting his Sovereign with merely a group of his clergy behind him, humbly placing the good city of Mayence unreservedly at the disposal of the Emperor, and begging permission to extend his benediction upon the expedition that had swung so jauntily along the stoned-paved river-front of the town, asking no one's leave, and making the air ring with patriotic songs. The Emperor had dismounted, standing with bowed head to receive the Prelate's blessing, and afterwards extended a cordial invitation to his Lordship to accompany him, which overture was gratefully accepted. Thus the Prelate stood on the Emperor's left, and the nobles were pleased to note that this position seemed to indicate that, while his Majesty welcomed the co-operation of the Church, still it would not be paramount in his counsels, as one of their own order occupied the first place.

Some rumour of what was about to occur had gone forth, and as the moment approached at which the Archbishops were to appear before the throne, to plead perhaps for their lives, the face of his Lordship of Mayence was a study that might have afforded satisfaction to a physiognomist. He endeavoured to assume that air of superior righteousness which so well becomes a somewhat expansive and benign countenance. Occasionally a smirk of satisfaction appeared, only to be smoothed instantly away, giving place to an expression of that deep resignation which is frequently bestowed, like a benediction, on a good man called upon to endure a sight of the humiliation of his enemies. He clasped his fat fingers before him—he was rather corpulent, and his hands had thus a resting place—essaying to compose his placid features into an unctuous semblance that betokened dim knowledge of the wickedness which is rampant in this world, and a solemn grief for the same, mitigated by a subdued confidence that virtue has other rewards than the mere satisfaction of possession.

On the dais and on its steps, and along each wall,

nobles were grouped according to their degree, while in the centre, between the dais and the entrance to the tent, a wide space was left vacant until their Lordships of Treves and Cologne should arrive, which they did promptly at the hour named. They came in unattended, save by their two secretaries, the large escort which accompanied them from their camp being, by order of von Brunfels, halted outside the pavilion.

The Archbishop of Treves turned an unflinching look upon his sovereign, whom he now beheld for the first time, but the Prelate of Cologne took time by the forelock, and, without waiting to be addressed, flung himself prostrate on the lower steps of the dais, crying:

“Your Gracious Majesty, I implore your pardon. I have been deeply to blame, and bitterly do I regret my fault. Had I known that my action was contrary to your Majesty’s will, I would have abandoned all my offices and honours, retiring humbly to the poorest monastery in my Archbishopric rather than have offended your Majesty.”

Rodolph seemed taken aback by the unexpected and abject impetuosity of his Lordship of Cologne, and for a moment he sat silent, gazing with compassion in his glance upon the grovelling figure of the man at his feet. When at last he spoke, his accent was kindly.

“My Lord, I ask you to arise. We are all prone to error, and a man can but say, ‘I am culpable, and I regret it.’ If he make amends in after conduct there is little to be said against him, and I have small inclination to enact the implacable judge, hoping myself for mercy rather than for justice, as our Holy Church gives us assurance to expect. Rise, therefore, my Lord, and make answer to some questions I wish now to propound to you. Are you content to return to your fair city of Cologne and there busy yourself with what pertains to your office of Archbishop, leaving me to deal with such nobles as Count Heinrich, should their punishment become necessary?”

“I am more than content, your Majesty,” replied the Archbishop fervently, once again upon his feet, although, with bowed head, he held himself most contritely.

“Are you content to permit the men in your command, now under arms around Thuron, to join my army and renounce allegiance to you?”

“Yes, your Majesty, and also those in Cologne, if such is your Majesty’s pleasure.”

“I have sent to Cologne ten thousand men, who are there to do fitting honour to your high office, and you will thus be saved the trouble of supporting a larger force than is necessary for your personal requirements. You have no objection to this arrangement, I trust?”

“None in the least, your Majesty, and as I take this to mean that your gracious clemency is about to be extended to me, I most loyally and gratefully thank your Majesty.”

“Then there is no more to be said, my Lord. Will you take your place at my left, in company with your brother of Mayence, who is, I see, eager to give you a cordial welcome.”

The Archbishop von Hochstaden took station beside the Archbishop of Mayence, but such admirable control did the Prelate of the Upper Rhine possess over his emotions, that no one would have suspected him of undue delectation in receiving a penitent sinner back into the circle of the righteous.

“My Lord of Treves,” said the Emperor, “you have heard the terms on which I have consented to overlook the transgression against my rightful authority committed by your friend and ally. This knowledge will, I hope, make our conference brief. I therefore grant you a hearing.”

“I have to thank your Majesty for the privilege, but I am somewhat at a loss to know what use to make of it. I was called hither for the purpose of answering certain questions which I was led to understand your Majesty would ask, and the unnecessary caution was given me that I should make truthful rejoinder.

If, then, your Majesty will further favour me with the questions, I shall reply to the best of my poor ability."

"Oh, stands the case so, my Lord? You shall not be kept waiting. Why have you dared to levy war in my dominion with my permission neither asked nor received?"

"I acted strictly within my rights. Heinrich of Thuron is my vassal. He connived at the escape or abduction of my ward, the Countess Tekla, who, flying from my strictly lawful control, sought refuge in Thuron. My demand for her restoration was illegally refused, therefore I besieged the castle, and it would long since have been a heap of ruins had I not been fool enough to link myself with the craven coward to whom you have just given place by your imperial side."

"Was demand for restoration made of the Count before you attacked him?"

"Yes, your Majesty; made and refused."

"Am I right in stating that when such demand was made and refused, the Count appealed to his Sovereign and yours?"

"I heard nothing of such an appeal."

"Who was your envoy?"

"Count Bertrich."

"Where is Count Bertrich now?"

"He is at the head of my escort, outside this tent, having been refused admission."

"Let him be called."

An intense silence had reigned during this colloquy between the Emperor and the Archbishop. All eyes were now turned toward the entrance, and presently Count Bertrich, accompanied by the messenger sent for him, came in, and took his place before the dais near the spot where his master stood. The Count blinked for a few moments, coming as he did from the brilliant sunshine outside into the comparative obscurity of the tent. At last he glanced about him, seeing many there whom he knew, all standing silent as if something ominous had happened or was expected to

happen ; finally his eye rested on the Emperor, and a look of amazed incredulity came into his face on beholding before him the young man whose life he had attempted. Ruddy as he was, the colour partially left his cheeks, and he stared, open-eyed, at his Sovereign, receiving, however, no glance of recognition in return. The Emperor sat imperturbable, his face stern and inscrutable, giving the warrior time to collect himself, then he spoke calmly.

“I am told you are the envoy who carried the ultimatum of his Lordship of Treves to Heinrich, Count of Thuron.”

“I was the envoy, your Majesty.”

“Is it a fact that the Count, in refusing the demand to give up his castle to his Lordship, appealed to the Emperor?”

“Yes, your Majesty.”

“Is it true that you claimed for your master special authority from the Emperor, and that Count Heinrich said he would deliver up his stronghold on the production of that authority?”

“Yes, your Majesty.”

“Of course you acquainted your master with such important incidents?”

“No, your Majesty. I immediately attacked the castle in defiance of the wishes of my Lord of Treves, and entirely without his sanction. I alone am to blame for the beginning of hostilities, from which, once begun, my Lord could not withdraw without loss of prestige.”

“You did not then inform him of Count Heinrich’s appeal until after your unsuccessful assault?”

“I have no remembrance of ever so informing him, your Majesty. Shortly after the first attack I was wounded in the mouth and could not speak for many days.”

“You have entirely recovered, I am pleased to see, and no doubt your present speaking is much to the liking of the Archbishop. You shamelessly admit, then, that you deceived your master, and at the same

time gravely wronged Count Heinrich of Thuron by neglecting to report his appeal."

"I fully admit it, your Majesty, and am prepared to suffer for my crime."

"Arrest this man, and see to it that he has no communication with any, until sentence is passed upon him."

The Archbishop of Treves, who had been visibly uneasy during the latter part of this cross-examination, now intervened.

"Your Majesty, permit me to mend an answer I gave to you. When I replied that I knew nothing of such an appeal as Heinrich of Thuron is said to have made——"

"Said to have made, my Lord? The appeal is proven through the mouth of your own envoy. It seems that the caution to speak the truth, of which you complained, has been more than justified. I warn you, my Lord, that you are treading on dangerous ground in thus attempting to juggle with me."

"I beg to say, your Majesty, that two years have passed since the events under discussion took place, and men's memories are sometimes at fault when even shorter periods are in question. For instance, my trusty ally, who leaped so quickly into your Majesty's favour, doubtless forgets that a few brief days since he bound himself solemnly to stand or fall with me, whereas he has fallen alone—at your Majesty's feet."

"I was coerced," explained Von Hochstaden.

"There also your remembrance fails you, my valourous Lord. It was your own proposition. But all this has nothing to do with the point in argument, and it may be that Count Bertrich's loyalty has clouded his memory, while it is possible that my own recollection has not been of the best in dealing with doings long past, these doings having connection with so unscrupulous a man as Heinrich of Thuron. His appeal I did not consider as anything but a ruse to gain time. He well knew that your Majesty was thousands of leagues away and that it would be long

before his petition could be heard ; in truth, for two years, as has been shown by your present return. Therefore, I paid no heed to an invocation that was on the face of it dishonest. When Count Bertrich says he acted without my orders he speaks the technical truth, but everything he did had my most cordial approval, then and now ; and, as I have said before, if we had not been harnessed with a poltroon, we should have had the castle within five days. It is futile, then, to punish this underling, and let the chief culprit go, if my action be adjudged censurable.”

“Your action is adjudged a crime.”

“Then I plead that, in justice, Count Bertrich should not suffer, being under my command.”

“Your Lordship is not logical. Count Bertrich has himself confessed that he acted without your sanction. Your crime is that you approved of an illegal action, not that you gave illegal orders, which, it seems, you did not.”

What motion the proud Prelate might have made at this juncture which would have led to his inevitable destruction, can only be surmised, but, happily for him, he cast a glance at his brethren of Cologne and Mayence, and detected on their faces ill-concealed looks of triumph. It meant much to them that the Lion of Treves should accomplish his own ruin, and the stern face of the Emperor indicated that unqualified submission must be made to him, if, indeed, such submission were not already too long delayed. That brief gleam of triumph on the face of his late ally saved von Isenberg. His manner instantly changed.

“Your Majesty,” he said in a penitential tone, “I am compelled to confess that I am illogical, and that the case against me is but too clear, looking at it from your Majesty’s higher point of view, unburdened by the prejudice, and, perhaps I should add with shame, the hatred which has enveloped me. I have no excuse to offer, and there is nothing left for me to hope, except that the clemency which you so generously bestowed on others you may extend to—Count Bertrich.”

The Emperor's face lightened, and something almost approaching a smile touched his lips as he saw that the haughty Archbishop, in spite of his evident intention to sue for favour when he began, could not bring himself to beg for any save a friend. The Emperor ignored his lack of pleading for himself, and said:

"Are you content to return to Treves and accept the protection which my soldiers will deem it an honour to supply?"

"I am content, your Majesty."

"Are you content to allow your men now gathered round Thuron to join those under my standard?"

"I am content, your Majesty."

"Are you content to give up the guardianship of the Countess Tekla?"

"It has brought me little profit and some loss of prestige, so I am well rid of it. I am content, your Majesty."

The Emperor rose from his throne and descended the steps of the dais, extending his hand.

"My Lord Archbishop," he said, "I hope from this day forward to count you one of my friends."

"In truth, your Majesty," replied von Isenberg dryly, "I would rather have you my friend than my enemy."

"It is a sentiment which finds an echo in my own breast," responded the Emperor with undeniable amity, and casting a sharp glance on Count Bertrich, he added: "Is that defective memory of yours local or general, my Lord Count?"

"It is universal, your Majesty. Men whom I have met two years ago I could not recognise to-day."

"Ah! Such misfortunes, deplorable as they may seem, are not without their compensation, my Lord."

Saying this, the Emperor mounted the dais, and in a few brief sentences made congratulatory reference to the peaceable adjustment, thus dismissing the assemblage.

CHAPTER XLII.

TEKLA REPLENISHES HER WARDROBE.

THE Countess Tekla leaned long over the parapet of Castle Thuron, gazing sadly into the night. The brilliant moonlight seemed a mockery of former happiness, now that she stood bathed in it alone. Into the darkness of the forest, into the uncertainty of the future, her lover had gone, confident that his single arm would bring rescue to the besieged; and the girl, melancholy as she was at the parting, felt as assured of his success as if it were already accomplished. He had been compelled to steal away in the shadow of the trees, as cautiously and secretly as if he were on a mission of death, but she was sure he would return openly and triumphantly as a champion of life. Her dreamy eyes lost sight of the dark wood, and she saw in imagination her hero at the head of his men break through the iron cordon which had so long encompassed the castle, bringing, with ringing cheers, succour to the oppressed. At last, with dimmed eyes and a deep sigh, the girl turned and beheld the ghost-like vision of Hilda standing there, silently weeping.

“Oh, Hilda, how you startled me. Why are you sorrowing?”

“So many terrible things have happened to-night, my Lady, that I am filled with fear. I weep because I have lost my lover,” said Hilda, simply.

“Yes, Hilda, the cruel wood has hidden him, but he will soon return, so have no fears. And, Hilda, listen. We are two women alone together, and I think women are alike whatever their station; lady or serf, what can

they do but weep when their lovers leave them? My own eyes are wet, Hilda, because my lover went with yours!"

"The Lord Rodolph, my Lady?" exclaimed Hilda, her curiosity and match-making instinct mastering her emotion.

"The Lord Rodolph, Hilda."

"Oh, my Lady, I am glad."

"Are you, Hilda?" cried the girl, embracing her. "So am I. Now let us forget our mutual grief in our mutual joy. Walk with me along this promenade, here in the moonlight, and tell me about it. Where did you meet, and what did he say to you? Do lovers talk the same language all the world over? I believe they do; a language understood only by themselves, and untranslatable to others. What did he tell you, Hilda?"

"I do not remember, my Lady," said Hilda, as they walked together up and down; Hilda with drooping head. "We met, and were with each other, and seemed to want nothing more, and the words did not matter. Sometimes he said the moon shone brightly, or, in the darkness, that the stars twinkled, and yet I knew he was speaking of me and not of the moon or the stars, and that I was thinking of him!"

"Yes," said Tekla, with a sigh, "the moon shines and the stars twinkle and we think how beautiful they are, but that is because he is here, for now the moon shines as brightly for others, perhaps, but not for us, because he is absent, and we see none of the former beauty in the shining, but only the brilliant loneliness; the empty night."

Hilda glanced timorously about her when her lady spoke of the night, for the events of the evening had so unnerved her that even the thought of her rescued lover could not turn her mind from the dangers which surrounded them. Everything seemed peaceful, but everything had seemed peaceful when Conrad was suddenly pounced upon, and all but hanged. She shuddered and said tremblingly:

"Is it safe for us to walk thus conspicuously on the battlements? Is it not dangerous?"

"Dangerous?" cried the Countess, clasping her hands, and gazing with rapture along the promenade. "It is the most dangerous spot on earth, Hilda, and the most delicious."

"Then let us leave it, my Lady. An archer might mark us out, for the enemy are doubtless lingering near, although unseen by us."

"It is too late, Hilda. An archer has already marked me out and has shot me through the heart, all on these battlements, yet I cared little, for I had been mortally wounded before."

Hilda looked with dismay at the Countess standing there oblivious to her surroundings, forgetting even that she had a companion, the moonlight enfolding her in its gentle radiance. From this wild talk of archers and wounding, Hilda feared that reason had fled from her beloved mistress, but the Countess, guessing her thought, turned suddenly toward her and laughed.

"Yes, Hilda, reason has deserted me, and I have before now on this spot acted directly contrary to its teachings, and yet am I without regret. But we must talk no more of lovers and the moonlight, nor even of the subdued twinkling of the stars, and to show you how practical I am, I will tell you what we are to do these coming few days, so that we may think of nothing but that we have in hand. I have not yet told you, Hilda, how glad I am that you are with me again, and how much I missed you all these long months. I am so helpless without you, and these hands are as useless—as useless——"

"They are most beautiful, my Lady."

"Yes, he said that, and it therefore must be true," murmured the Countess, looking down at her fair hands as impartially as if they belonged to someone else, as indeed they did. "What could he see in me, Hilda, to wish for me? I am obstinate and unruly. I left my guardian in a most unmaidenly manner; I am often defiant to all rightful authority, and have

rebelled when my uncle has commanded. He knows all this, for he aided me in my flight, and he has seen me face my uncle in anger, and yet—and yet—Why is it, Hilda?”

“You are the most lovely lady on this earth, Countess Tekla.”

“That cannot be, for I have heard there are the fairest ladies in Frankfort, at the Court, that man has ever looked upon, yet he came from Frankfort, and from the Emperor’s Court, and must have seen them. Even were it true what you say, I would not have him love me for that alone. I care for him, not because he is the noblest and best in all the land, but because he is Rodolph, and he—perhaps he cares for me because I am Tekla. It is all a mystery which I cannot fathom. I left my guardian knowing nothing of Rodolph, and now it seems as if I must always have known him, and that he was waiting for me, as in truth he was. But here am I talking of him again, after saying I would think no more until he returned. Oh yes, I remember now what I wished to tell you, when your flattery about my hands set me off on the familiar path. Hilda, in this castle I have made a wonderful discovery. Ah, I have made more than one unlooked-for discovery since I inhabited Thuron, for nothing is more wonderful or more entrancing than that I should have discovered his—Oh, Hilda, shall I ever talk sanely again? I doubt it.”

“What discovery in the castle, my Lady?”

“Oh, that there is here a veritable robber’s cave, such as the minstrels sing about.”

“Indeed, such is what they call the castle itself down in Alken.”

“Do they? I wonder why. Hilda, there is in Thuron an enchanted room; I know it is enchanted, for the light is dim, and the ghosts of bygone ladies haunt it continually.”

“Oh, my Lady,” cried Hilda, horror-stricken. “You have not been near it, I hope.”

“How could I keep out of it, or how blame the

poor ghosts for wandering through it? The room is filled with the most wonderful webs of cloth, of every dye, some filmy as spider's weaving, some thick as armour. Had one the art to fashion it into women's garments, there is enough within that room to clothe most richly all the ladies of the Court at Frankfurt. How came my uncle by this cloth, or what use can he have for it, I cannot imagine, but I am sure the ghosts of all the ladies for whom the webs were intended must haunt the place, sorrowful that they had never an opportunity of wearing the unmade apparel. When I enter the room I wave my hand and bid the ghosts begone, and then, being sorry for my cruelty, I spread out the cloth so that they may see how beautiful it is and of what rare texture, for the poor ghosts cannot do this by themselves. Come with me, Hilda, and I will show you the room."

"Oh no, no, my Lady. I dare not venture in it. I would rather face all the Archbishop's troops than those dead ghosts."

"Nonsense, child. There is really nothing there to fright you, and if I can enter the room often and often alone, surely you will not hang back when I am with you. You shall devise most lovely costumes for us both, so that when our lovers return we shall enslave them anew, and in the making of our robes we shall have something more practical to think of than the glamour of the moonlight. Why did you not teach me to sew, Hilda? I never knew what a useless creature I was until I stood among all that rare assortment, enough to delight any woman's eye, and had no skill in the fashioning of the smallest piece of it. Then did I sit down and selfishly weep because you were not with me. And I have selected one web of quiet hue, but rich in texture, finely spun, which you shall make for my aunt, poor lady, who has never had anything to wear that she might be proud of. Come, Hilda, bring a lamp to ward off the darkness, and I shall keep the ghosts away from you."

Hilda, encouraged by the presence of the Countess,

ventured into the silken store-room, containing the unwilling tribute of many a merchant to the potentate of Thuron, and once within the haunted chamber, was soon so much absorbed in the cutting of the material selected, and the fitting of it on the lovely model who posed before her, that all fear of spiritual onlookers fled, and so deft was the fair seamstress in the passion of her occupation that she would have measured and fitted even a ghost if the apparition had presented itself before her with a sepulchral request for a garment. When the attire of the Countess was completed, the lady then began to wonder, not without an admixture of apprehension, what her turbulent uncle would say when this mutilation of his goods came to his knowledge, and so resolved to settle the question once for all before Rodolph returned. Tekla entered the great dining hall, arrayed in all her splendour, her heart fluttering with anxiety regarding her reception, yet she was in a measure sustained by that feeling of confidence which comes to those who know they are handsomely attired. Heinrich's wife was so startled that she gasped in terror and cast an apprehensive glance at her husband, as his niece glided with apparent composure into the room. The Black Count himself looked up, but noticing no difference, merely grumbled that Tekla was late and went on with his scanty meal.

CHAPTER XLIII.

THE COUNTESS AND THE EMPEROR.

ONE morning word came hurriedly to the Count that there was a commotion near Alken, an attack being feared. Heinrich ascended to the battlements without haste and without enthusiasm. If an assault came he would repel it if he could, but he had little heart in the prospect of a fight, and as little hope of ultimate success. He had welcomed the departure of Rodolph and his two companions, largely because their going left three mouths less to feed, but he had such small faith in Rodolph's proffer of rescue that all thought of the young man had already gone from his mind.

Reaching the battlements, he saw on the plain to the south of the village evidence of something unusual in progress. Bugles were blowing, and men from the tents and the lines were hurriedly concentrating at a point where they seemed called upon to oppose some unexpected force. A man on horseback was listening to the protests of an officer of the Archbishop, who gesticulated violently, and apparently all answer the horseman made was to point to the flag which waved above him. What the flag was that lazily floated above its staff, Heinrich could not make out, but presently the horseman gave a signal to one of his buglers, and a trumpet call rang along the valley, and was echoed mockingly from the rocks opposite Alken. In a short space of time there came out from the shelter of the village, along the river street, soldiers marching four abreast, one line following another so closely that they seemed to tread on each other's

heels, quartette after quartette, as if the village were some huge reservoir of men, and was belching them forth in such numbers that there was little wonder the Archbishop's officers stood helpless before this display of military power. At last the movement stopped, and the soldiers were halted four deep, standing at ease with their formidable array of lances bristling above them. Again the mounted man seemed to prefer his request or command, and this time heed was given it. The Archbishop's troops parted, leaving an open space, and through this came, not the soldiers who had the moment before exhibited their numbers, but laden animals with attendants, led by the officer on horseback. The procession came up the zig-zag path that ended at the castle gates, and every man of Thuron's garrison, who now clustered on the walls, raised a simultaneous cheer. They recognised the move as a break in the Archbishop's cordon, and vociferously acclaimed that help and food were coming to them.

Count Heinrich, however, was no optimist. His naturally suspicious mind caused him to imagine that here was merely another trick of his enemy of Treves, and he stood silent and grim, with arms folded across his breast, watching distrustfully the ascending cavalcade; and thus he remained until the trumpeter summoned the gate.

The mounted officer rode boldly forward as if he feared no rebuff. "Count Heinrich of Thuron," he cried to the motionless figure that stood like a lowering statue on the platform above the gate. "I greet you in the name of his Majesty, the Emperor, and am commanded by him to deliver to you food and wine, which I bring with me. I await your orders regarding their bestowal within your castle."

"How am I to know that you come from the Emperor, his Majesty being at this moment in Palestine?"

"The Emperor Rodolph has returned, my Lord, and is now at the head of his army, gathered on the plain to the east of Thuron. His troops have surrounded

the camp of the Archbishops, and it is his Majesty's will that this siege be immediately raised. My orders were to force a passage through to your gates if resistance were offered, but that was not necessary, as the Archbishops' officers made way for us when they found themselves confronted by overwhelming opposition; besides, they lacked orders from the Archbishops, who are now themselves besieged and cannot communicate with their captains."

A fierce fire lit up the eyes of the Black Count, and he glanced over his shoulder in the direction of the Archbishops' camp to see if there were any sign of the environment of which the imperial messenger spoke. A low murmur, not unlike a growl, broke from his own men, impatient at the delay. The animal was hungry and scented its food.

"Open the gates," cried Heinrich, and the growl changed into a cheer again. The Count knew that if this were a trap he had no option but to fall into it, for they could not hold out longer. The gates were thrown open and relief entered.

Willing hands speedily unpacked the hampers. Many of the meats were already prepared for the table, well cooked and temptingly garnished. It required all the terror of the Count's eye to prevent his men from rushing forward and helping themselves. The master of Thuron appreciated the tension and saw that this was no time for delay or the display of undue authority. "Make the parapets your table," he shouted, "and the battlements your dining hall. You shall feast in sight of the Archbishops, if they care to look on. Fall to, and wait no ceremony."

Never was even Count Heinrich's command obeyed more promptly. The Emperor had been thoughtful and had sent a staff of cooks, with the material for their manipulation, and this was the more welcome when Count Heinrich heard, with something like consternation, that it was the Emperor's intention to visit Castle Thuron that day and dine with its master. This was an honour for which Count Heinrich felt

himself in no way prepared, nor was it a distinction which he coveted. He paced the large room gloomily when the envoy had left him, pondering over his predicament, for he was not accustomed to the etiquette of courts, and had little practice in the bending of the knee. Upon his dilemma there suddenly intruded the radiant presence of his niece, aglow with excitement. He glared moodily at her approach.

"Is it true," she cried, "that the Emperor is to visit us?"

"I fear so," growled the Count.

"Fear so, Uncle? I am ashamed of you. How can you say you fear, when the moment he returned from the East he came to your rescue, no doubt as soon as my Lord Rodolph acquainted him with your position."

"It is not likely Lord Rodolph had anything to do with it. I have heard nothing of Lord Rodolph."

"Nevertheless, you will soon hear of him, and he it was who caused this quick rescue to be brought about. Rodolph will come to the castle by the side of the Emperor, and I will not have him ashamed of us."

"It matters not to me what Lord Rodolph thinks; if he has indeed had a hand in this, I wish him well for it."

"But the Emperor is coming! The Emperor is coming. Everything else gives way to that. We shall see him and speak with him, and he shall know that here are his most loyal subjects assembled. We must receive him royally."

"What can we do? He comes—well, let him come. He has sent his dinner and the cooks to prepare it, so in God's name we will allow him to eat it, since it belongs to him, but what further can we do? I can say good-day to him, but if you expect me to bow and kneel and scrape to him, by the Holy Coat, I will leave the castle first."

"You shall do nothing of the kind. You shall put under my orders every man you have; there is work enough for them all to do. Hilda, come here."

Hilda, who had been standing at the door, came forward.

“Hilda, throw open the ghost room and tell a dozen of the men to carry down bales of cloth: the crimson silk to this room, the purple and blue and scarlet webs to the courtyard.”

“What?” roared the Black Count. “What do you know of those bales?”

“Everything, my Lord Uncle. I have rummaged all corners of the room and am thoroughly conversant with what it contains. And, Hilda, tell them to bring here the crimson silk first and I will show them how to festoon it.”

“You are mad,” cried her uncle, wrathfully, but standing before her uncertain what to do.

“Yes, with joy. I am to see the Emperor, and my Lord Rodolph, for I know they come in company. And now, what can I do with you? Your armour should be scoured, and—no, you are hopeless. I cannot festoon you with red silk, my Uncle, so I shall not attempt to improve you. You look like a great bear, and such indeed you are, but the Emperor, who is a fighter himself, will esteem valour in whatever shape it presents itself. He may have seen rougher men in the East, although I doubt it. Now go and tell your garrison that I have taken charge of the castle until the Emperor arrives, and wear just such a scowl as is now on your face when you order them to obey me.”

The helpless man laughed scornfully, but nevertheless made no objection, feeling that he had reached a situation which was beyond him, and that possibly his confident niece would retrieve the honour of his house.

In a marvellously short time, under Tekla's crisp direction, the appearance of the castle was completely changed, and old Thuron would not have known itself, so bravely was it decked with silk and bunting, to the great depletion of his Lordship's stores. The Black Count made no attempt to smarten himself and thus follow the example of his castle, but wandered impa-

tiently about, accoutred as he was and always had been, not knowing what to do with himself, manifestly ill at ease, alternately 'frowning and grimacing at the preparations and decorating going on around him. Once there arose a cry that the Emperor was in sight, and Tekla, in despair, wrung her hands that he came so soon, but it was a false alarm, and Heinrich, going to the battlements, saw with a savage joy that the cause of the commotion was the striking of the tents belonging to the Archbishop's army. The two years' siege was at last raised. The Black Count lifted his clenched fist towards the unoffending sky and hoarsely cursed the departing legion.

From her fear that his Majesty would come too soon, the Countess began to apprehend that he would not come at all. The improvised carpet had been laid between the castle doorway and the gates; broad red cloth flanked by two webs of blue. Purple was looped over the archway, and gaudy streamers floated from the walls.

At last the detachment which had marched through the village began to ascend the slope, and soon from castle gate to river bank they lined each side of the way, forming an avenue of erect lances. Ringing cheers sounded from the village, marking the imperial progress, for the whole population of the country roundabout had turned out: even the opposite banks of the Moselle were thronged by thousands who could not get across.

The Countess Tekla, accompanied by her aunt, stood on the battlements to get thus the first view of the Emperor, although she had commanded her uncle to be in readiness, the moment his Majesty appeared below, to take his place at the open gate, where, supported by his two women folk, he was to offer his Sovereign the castle and the devotion of all within it. Presently horsemen appeared advancing past the southern end of the village, numbering, perhaps, two score, then there was an interval, and all onlookers knew at once it was the Emperor in his glittering ar-

mour who rode the prancing white horse, with but one attendant by his side. Following him came another troop of horse, and thus ascended to Castle Thuron the Emperor Rodolph, who but a short time before had slipped away from it, a fugitive in the night.

Those manning the walls of the castle raised a great cheer when they saw his Majesty, and Tekla could scarce refrain from clapping her hands at the brave spectacle. The Black Count looked at the cavalcade with the sombre discontent of one surveying a funeral procession, and Hilda sighed when she saw but a single attendant accompanying the Emperor.

"Uncle, if you will lead us down, we will now take our places at the gate," said Tekla, her voice quavering with conflicting emotions.

The Count obeyed in silence, and stood awkwardly, muttering low maledictions at this mummery, yet knowing there was nothing before him but endurance. His wife took up her position, trembling, at his right and his niece at his left.

The foremost horsemen ranged themselves on each side of the gate, their evolutions, for the moment, concealing the chief personage from the view of those standing in the portal. When the Emperor rode forward with Conrad at his side, Tekla cried out as one in fear, then for a moment leaned against her uncle for support. Heinrich looked at her white face, not knowing what ailed her, and was about to speak roughly, as was his custom, when she gasped hurriedly under her breath:

"Uncle, uncle, look. Who is the Emperor?"

The Black Count turned his gaze once more to the front and cried:

"By my sins, it is no Emperor at all, but Lord Rodolph."

Tekla, quicker of comprehension, whispered, holding bravely off the faintness that had suddenly come upon her:

"Lord Rodolph is the Emperor."

Rodolph swung himself lightly from the horse be-

fore Conrad could put hand to stirrup, and advanced quickly towards them, the cavalry coming to a halt behind him.

"My Lord Count," he cried, "you see how easy it is to take your castle when a real warrior comes against it."

The Count, having no answer at hand, made none, being troubled in his mind whether or no he should kneel, but if this neglect to bend the knee was a breach of Court etiquette, he was pleased to note that the Emperor was little likely to take heed of it. His Majesty had eyes for none but the Countess Tekla, who appeared indeed a queen in the stately robes that became her so well. Rodolph seemed suddenly stricken dumb by her beauty, for all the colour had fled from her face, leaving it like chiselled marble, as she stood demurely with her eyes bent on the ground.

"Tekla," he murmured, taking her hand with deep reverence, and raising it to his lips, "is the Prince who returns as welcome as the unknown Lord would have been?"

"Yes—your Majesty," whispered Tekla, casting a swift glance at him, the colour again touching her cheeks.

"And is Countess Tekla willing to become Empress Tekla?"

"The delight of a loyal subject is to obey the imperial command," she said, a smile coming at last to her lips.

Again the Emperor raised her hand and kissed it.

"I suppose," growled the Black Count, gruffly, "there is no further need of my standing here like a fool."

The Emperor laughed heartily, and the Countess Tekla joined him. The tensivity of the situation was at once relieved by the unmannerly remark of the master of Thuron.

"No, my Lord, no. What the Countess and I have to say to each other may be very well said with-

out listeners, and it is a pity a man should not enter his own house without asking permission. Ah, Hilda," he continued on seeing the girl, "I have made Conrad a Lord, and he tells me that in spite of his nobility, he loves a maid of low degree, and so we shall soon all be noble who once ventured our fortunes in a slight skiff on the Moselle Tekla," he whispered, as they entered the castle together, "you have now no guardian, for his Lordship of Treves willingly resigns control over so rebellious a vassal. Peace reigneth in the land, and there will be no fewer than three Archbishops at our marriage."

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